

THE CURSED KINGDOM
BOOK ONE

THE
COVETED
AND THE
CURSED

LYLAH TAYLOR

The Coveted and the Cursed

A BEAUTY AND THE BEAST RETELLING

LYLAH TAYLOR

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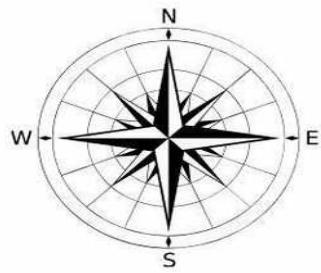
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Content Warnings

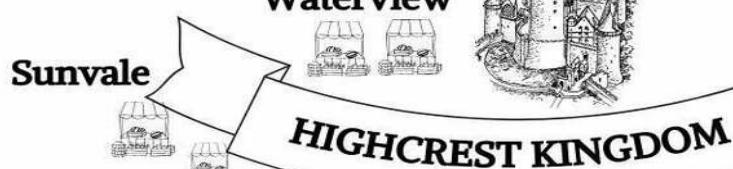
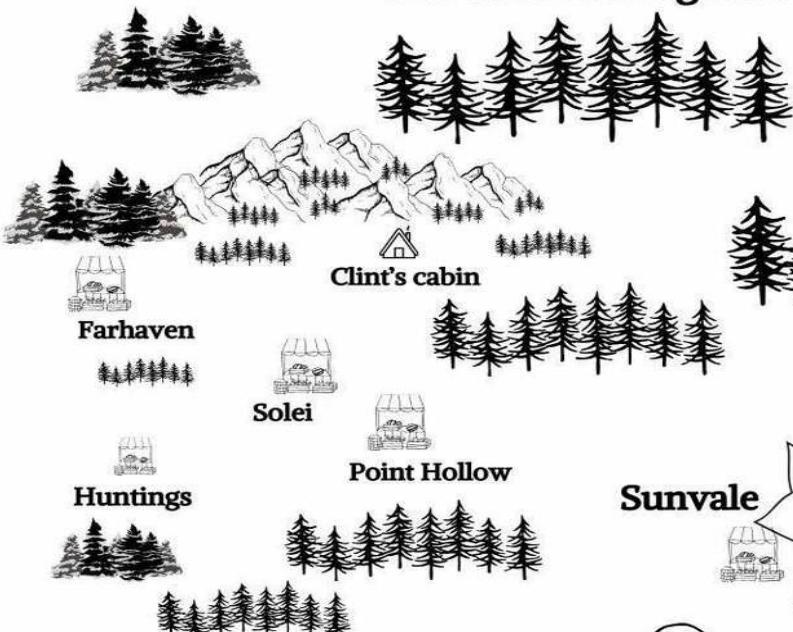
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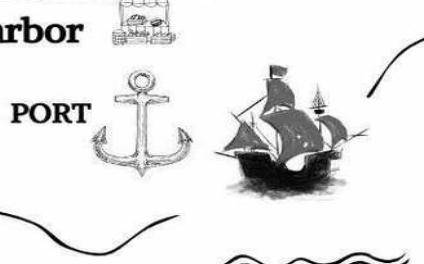
MYELLE



The Cursed Kingdom



South Harbor



*To anyone who feels like they've fallen behind...
It's never too late to bloom ♥*



Mira



Wind howled beyond the walls of my newest prison, slipping through the slats of this weathered cabin. It almost sounded forlorn.

Maybe it was the gods lamenting with me, a reminder they cared. That I wasn't abandoned. But it started to feel that way.

The steady drip I'd grown used to continued its unrelenting melody. *Plip, plip, plip* onto the eroding stone hearth from a crack in the chimney. Dimming embers signaled the end of my warmth for the night. I tightened my grip on the thin, scratchy wool blanket, but it did little against the chill.

Layers of worn, tattered fabric, doing its best to imitate curtains, covered the only window in view. No matter how long I stared, my vision never could breach the woven strands to glimpse the starry-dotted sky outside.

Outside.

It'd been weeks since the sun blessed its light upon my skin, or the leaves danced before my eyes. An awful front of rain tore through the secluded property, pelting the cabin for days on end. The only opportunity for fresh air came from when he burst through the shabby wooden door, balancing too much firewood to immediately close it.

I so looked forward to those fleeting moments.

I was surprised how long I'd been with this man. Usually a single captor didn't last beyond a few days—too easily overpowered or outnumbered.

Iron bars, recently added for my 'benefit', he'd said, replaced a door to this tiny room. Maybe he thought it a benefit because a regular door would have left me in the dark, completely removed from the hearth's heat. This room was only wide enough for a small, hay-stuffed mattress with hardly any space to maneuver around, and a spot for my boots and chamber pot. A tiny prison in the already tiny prison.

Below the window, the rounded boulder of a man jolted as his rough, scratchy cough erupted out of nowhere. Gurgled sounds of phlegm made my face wince. He readjusted his head on his pillow, then settled once again.

Despite the chill, I wouldn't ask him to stoke the fire. Over the years, I'd learned that the less I say, the better off I'd be. Their desire swiftly turned to anger when they recognized how normal I truly was, and they didn't receive their reward fast enough. As if I could snap my fingers and magically grant them whatever they wanted.

That's the danger with rumors.

They run rampant and take on a life of their own. An unstoppable wildfire, consuming any attempts you make to set them right and leaving them in a fiery ash. No, I'd remain silent, a mystery. Something reminiscent of a deity earned more respect—and less hostility—than someone magically blessed. An obedient deity, at that, received the best treatment. So I listened. Followed orders. Stayed quiet. Answered probing questions with cryptic passages of poetry, leaving them to detangle the words and meaning.

What I wouldn't do for a book to pass the time. Turning onto my back, I stared into the endless shadows.

I'd lost count years ago over how many had taken me in an attempt to fulfill their desires. How many lives had been lost in the pursuit. How many times I'd hoped someone would save me.

Pinching my eyes closed, I refused to let my thoughts wander further. They'd only bring me to those places I fought to bury, memories that haunted my sleeping and waking dreams. I forced the darkness to consume me, letting it pull me under until I reached that beautiful, numbing nirvana.

I'd rest while I could, waiting to see if tomorrow he'd finally reveal why he took me, or if his patience would finally wear thin.



Pots and pans clanged together, pulling me from sleep. Sunlight brightened the cabin, and the fire raged and crackled with ferocity. A new day greeted me with warmth and light, but the cold darkness in my chest remained immovable.

He threw together wild mushrooms and other forested items into the boiling pot. His cooking wasn't fantastic, but neither was it bad. At least I didn't have many hunger pains with him, better than some of the others. I remained laying down, looking out into the space through bars. The nightly chill had long since gone, and I removed the cover so I wouldn't overheat. He caught the movement.

"G'd mornin', Red." Always exuberant, even in the mornings.

Or maybe it was afternoon now. I couldn't tell. It didn't really matter. Nothing really did.

"Any messages f'r me today?"

I sat up, blinking away the sleep from my weary eyes. Straightening my back and keeping my head down, I folded my hands neatly in my lap. "The gods decide the message, and the hearer interprets the words. Sometimes words aren't the kind that are spoken, so it's more than an ear that needs to listen." Rehearsed, stolen lines.

He chuckled while stirring. "Never straight f'rward, are ya, Red?"

It'd be worse if I was.

The amusement in his eyes dulled as he looked me over and tapped the spoon on the rim of the tiny cauldron. His brown eyes fell to the ground, and his lips twisted. Something like sorrow, or maybe guilt. Few had wrestled with their conscience over my captivity, making the expression hard to detect.

My own remained unchanged.

Sunlight played along his scraggly, long hair streaked with age. His untamed beard was essentially all white, mirroring the cracks in his forehead.

"The weather is finally tempered, Red. Warmed up a bit. How about we get you outside f'r a wee bit, hm?"

A ray of light through the clouds of my soul. I didn't think I could have nodded faster if my life depended on it. "Yes, please." Desperation wouldn't let me remain silent, not when it could rob me of the chance to get out of this ramshackle hut.

He flashed a smile as warm as the stew simmering in the pot.

I used to feel bitter toward my captors, but that grew to be exhausting. Especially when they were never around long. Anger wouldn't serve me—one of the other lessons I'd learned throughout my years in captivity.

Steam swirled around his face while he tended to the food, the scent of onions and garden vegetables filling the air. "We'll go after we eat. There's still a nip in the air, so this should warm y'r belly plenty." He plunged the ladle into the pot, pulling up a heap of watery vegetables. Broth overflowed, dripping off the bottom until he poured it all into a bowl dwarfed by his hand.

A large man, the kind that even the cleric wasn't brave enough to stand up to. Was it weird that I felt relief being taken by this man? The cleric had that look in his eye, the same one I saw on the night my life had been destroyed. The fingerprint bruises on my arm had surely faded by now.

Sidestepping the lone rocking chair, the man approached my holding place. The cage door creaked open with an ugly squeal after he unlocked it, but it may as well have been a melody. I reached for the meal with both hands, careful not to spill.

He stepped away, keys jingling as he fumbled with the ring. He paused for a beat, staring idly at the keys before hanging them on the protruding nail by the door. It didn't go unnoticed that he didn't relock the door. My heart beat a little faster.

The uneven ceramic sent heat blooming over my palms, sinking into my bones. Delight flooded my worn spirit. I was getting out of this room.

We ate in silence as usual, nothing but the pop of embers and our spoons tapping rhythmically with each scoop. I was all too aware of the unrestricted access to the front door. Only my imagination had made up the landscape that lay beyond.

When we'd arrived after weeks of traveling through the woods, it was dark and I'd been too desperate for shelter to pay attention to my surroundings. The rains had begun then, and though this shack left much to be desired, in that moment, it may as well have been a castle.

He tipped his bowl, slurping any remnants of broth before setting it down and wiping his mouth with the back of his arm. Wet spots darkened his sleeve, adding to the mural of stains on his dingy clothes. Not a man of wealth, clearly, but that'd been evident by this place and his calloused hands from a lifetime of labor.

He stood, and my eyes widened in anticipation. I slammed my empty bowl on the bed, the spoon rattling inside. I quickly slipped my feet into my boots. He chuckled at my obvious eagerness, extending his hand toward the door. Joy galloped in my chest like a herd of wild horses running across a vast plain.

For the first time in weeks, I stepped outside the confines of that room. My hands wrung together, and I didn't dare take

another step without further expressed permission. Something like sorrow gathered in his eyes before he simply stepped forward and opened the door for me.

The wave of fresh air I'd longed for each day plowed into me with a gentle force. I inhaled deeply. So deeply that I tried taking in every nuance it offered. Far-off pine needles, loose soil, hints of damp moss—everything that indicated a living forest.

"Go on." He gestured with a nod toward the freedom mere feet away.

Unable to contain my excitement, I leapt over the door frame, throwing my arms out to the sides and twirling under the warming rays of sunshine. I let it shower over me as I tipped my head back. Autumn leaves beneath my feet cushioned every spin, and each twirl unraveled the tight leash around my heart. Maybe it was childish to act this way at twenty-three, but it was all I had.

Moments like these were all I got to feel alive. So when they came, I submerged myself in them, letting the all too fleeting experience seep into every part of me. My vibrant red curls swayed and bounced, each strand searching for its own taste of freedom. My hair's brightness rivaled that of the sun, one of the telling features of *The Coveted*.

Hardly anyone existed with such obvious traits anymore. Only magic could produce a color so unnatural. Rarely did I get to take in the sight of it outdoors, careful to keep it hidden and tucked away under a hood during the rare times I was brought in public.

"Sorry I didn't let ya out sooner. Didn't want ya goin' an' catchin' a cold. Winter will come early this year, we shouldn't have had the temperature drop so quickly already. I'm sure you noticed during our trek here how the air increased its bite. With all the rain, wouldn't a been nice out here anyways." He leaned against the shack, arms and legs crossed over each other while he gazed around the sky.

"How 'bout we set up a fire tonight and sit under the stars?" As he finished the question, a ripping cough stole his breath. The sound of loosening phlegm echoed into the surrounding woods.

He leaned over, resting his hands on his knees, and hacked out a thick chunk that he spat at the ground. Crimson splatter decorated the grass. Not the first time his cough had been so rough it sliced his throat. He wiped his mouth again with his sleeve before standing tall again.

"What d'ya say, Red?" He placed his hands on his hips.

I nodded. Any opportunity to take in fresh air sounded splendid.

Jagged mountain tops stretched across the view behind the cabin, and a thought occurred. Deadly things existed beyond the rocky horizon in that cursed land. The man didn't seem fazed, though. He'd mentioned that he and his family used to stay here, and I presumed if there were dangers like the rumors claimed, he wouldn't have risked them.

Still, I didn't ask. Instead, I tried redirecting my thoughts so I could fully enjoy the peace of nature I had craved for weeks.

Beyond the area surrounding the cabin, trees with orange, red, and yellow leaves between the occasional green pines sheltered us from civilization. Based on how long our journey here had taken, we were fairly far from the nearest town. From the nearest people.

"I'm gon' take the stew off the stove so I don' overcook it. I wouldn't recommend wanderin' far, there are wolves in these woods." He scanned the tree line, as if he might be able to spot one, then went inside.

Those invisible shackles loosened their controlling grip, and my soul sang in relief. Weight constantly carried on your shoulders eventually turns into a part of you that you no longer notice. A new extension, as normal as an arm or a leg. But when it gets taken off, you recognize how much of a burden it'd been.

Warm tears surged behind my eyes, blurring my vision before I could blink them away. Surrounded by mountains and trees, this place truly seemed secluded. Hidden away.

Could it be possible that I actually stayed in one place? Others with stronger defenses had crumbled much sooner, but I'd been here for weeks. Optimism bubbled to the surface with greedy hunger.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I shook my head, refusing to let myself believe that this time would be different.

It wouldn't be. It never was. And hope wouldn't serve me.

I'd learned that, too.




Mira




Not once did he call me back inside the entire afternoon, and I kept my butt glued to the chair by the fire pit. I wouldn't give him any reason to restrict my access in the future.

The temperature dipped as the day went on, and now crisp autumn air nipped at my nose. The sun tucked itself behind the lofty mountain peaks, and not a single cloud marked the darkening blue sky.

He carried over extra firewood, letting the freshly chopped logs roll out of his arms. They tumbled beside the fire before he sat in one of the four chairs, extending his legs with a groan.

"Sittin' by the fire's one of my favorite things."

I sat with my legs drawn into my chest, staring at the licking flames that spit flecks of ash into the tunnel of smoke that wafted above. My scratchy wool blanket draped my shoulders. He'd brought it out earlier when the temperature shifted.

"How much longer we got together d'ya think, Red?" He laced his fingers together over his chest, peering at me from a tilted angle.

I stilled. His question prodded at the one I'd briefly entertained earlier, regarding how long I might be here.

He focused his attention back on the fire, and I hoped he'd drop the subject.

"Y'know, I don't mean anything by *Red*. Other than the obvious." His hand waved toward my hair. "But I had to call ya somethin'. I'm Clint, by the way."

My chest tightened. I didn't want to know.

"Realized just this afternoon I hadn't even introduced myself. What a prick, am I right?" His lips flattened into a jovial grin. Releasing a deep sigh, he continued, "I'm not doin' this for me, Red."

Solemnity weighed down his expression. "I have two girls...maybe not much older or younger than you. I'd ask, but since ya won't even give me y'r name... Which I understand, by the way, don' mean to put any pressure on ya." He held his palms up in supplication before crossing them over his rounded belly.

"They were mad at me f'r workin' in those damn iron mines f'r so long. One of the best opportunities in Highcrest, those iron ore mines, 'specially for an immigrant like me. Not to say it was without its trials. The physical toll, the long hours. But I only did it f'r them, y'know? Wantin' to give y'r kids a better life than you had. But then the glorious day came, *retirement*." His hands dramatically stretched over the invisible word before him. "My girls were so happy to have me home, to let me rest." He fell quiet.

I wondered if he'd finished speaking. Part of me dreaded hearing more if he hadn't. But another part of me was desperate for something other than silence.

"Didn't take long f'r things to get tight again. Life's expensive. I wouldn't tell them that, though. Tula, my eldest, she's shadowing the seamstress in our town. Gets to learn the trade f'r free if she helps 'round the shop. No pay, mind you, but you should see the way Tula lights up when she talks about all she's learnin'."

"All of it goes over my head, of course. Fabrics, corsets, bows. I could never keep any of it straight. But Tula, my girl, she takes it all in like a sponge. She'll be the best seamstress in the kingdom one day, I just know it."

Pride mingled with the glow from the fire, a competition for which shone brighter on his face. A smile formed that carried the sentiment of his love for her so evidently that I swore I could feel it. If my life had been different, would my father have talked about me this way?

"Then there's Ro. She's a firecracker, that one. Spittin' image of her mother. Every day I look at her, I get to see a piece of my departed wife Tessa. She'd have forced me to retire long ago if she were still here." He dropped his head back against the chair, gazing up into the sky, as if searching.

A few stars shone bright enough to dot the darkening blue expanse. He looked at them as if he imagined her floating up there. My stomach tightened, filling with the memory of loss and the pain that accompanies it.

"My girls shouldn't have to take care of their old man. I should be the one takin' care of them." His energy shifted. Gone from something longing and reflective to resentful and determined. "The doc says I only have a few months left. But that's not enough time, Red." His eyes held a new sheen when he locked his gaze with mine.

I knew the role he wanted me to play in this. From one person to the next, people stole me away, traded me, all so they could get what they wanted most.

It became clear why Clint had stolen me from the cleric and his wife. A restoration of his health, to provide for his daughters. The look in his eyes silently called to me, reaching out to take his hand and snap my fingers so that my magic cured him.

Regret already worked its way into my chest over the time at the campfire. The mountain beside us may as well crumble, pinning me beneath it; I was sure the crushing pressure would feel the same.

I had nothing to say, nothing to offer. His eyes begged me, and even though I'd trained myself to stay quiet, the only thing I could give started making its way out of my near trembling lips.

"The gods—"

"Yeah, yeah. The *gods*." Clint rolled his eyes, adjusting in his chair. "They've heard me for a long while now. The gods decided what to do with me a long time ago, Red. I was just hopin' you could change that." He leaned forward, taking a nearby stick, and poked the logs in the fire.

A rush of orange embers flew up, like a flurry of bugs racing away into the night. I wished I could join them. He tossed the stick to the side, reclining back in his chair, scrubbing his hands over his face. When he finally settled, he asked the question I'd heard countless times.

"Can ya help me, Red?"

No matter what I wanted to say, survival wouldn't let me. It wouldn't matter if for a moment the love of his daughters was so tangible it reminded me of my own parents. The hot stinging behind my eyes wanted to break free, like a dam bursting over the fact that I'd been reminded of how much I wanted a normal life with real relationships. People to care for, to love. Who loved me.

It didn't matter that Clint showed me some kindness. I couldn't answer him. Instead, I let the fire swallow my gaze. This time, instead of seeing the beautiful brightness of the flames, all I could see was the destruction of the logs.

Clint sighed. "Magic is a fickle thing. But if you can't help me, Red, there's no sense in you stayin'."

My eyes darted back to him, a race to determine if his words were threatening. It seemed, even without saying, he'd read my response correctly. My body tensed, but my legs readied to move, to bolt into the woods, wolves or not.

"I'd rather spend my final days with my own girls, no offense. They just like me more than you do." The skin beside his eyes creased as he held a smile of acceptance. "Not that I blame ya."

A moment passed.

"You could stay here, if ya want." He nodded toward the cabin behind me.

Remain here, with no one to lock that door on me. No one to use me for their desires. I could hardly believe my ears.

Suddenly, my perspective on that ramshackle structure changed. The falling apart shack that held a monotonous drip and scraps for curtains transformed into a cozy getaway tucked in the privacy of the woods. On my next inhale, I swear I could actually smell the mountains. They smelled like freedom.

A whirlwind of emotions and possibilities made my head spin. Each moment that passed sunk a shovel into the soil that long ago buried hopes and dreams that I could no longer carry. The thunderous pounding in my ears built in anticipation when they were so close to being uncovered that I could almost reach out and hold them again.

The digging stopped when Clint stood from his chair, snapping his gaze toward the woods, as if he'd heard something. My heartbeat had drowned out whatever he'd picked up on. I frantically scanned the trees, trying to locate what he sensed.

"Get in the cabin," Clint spoke quietly, but the sharpness in his voice was unmistakable.

Already on my feet, leaves crunched as I scurried back inside trying not to think of wolves teeth that hungered to tear me apart. Closing the door behind me, all I could hear were my clipped breaths. I rushed to the window and moved the thin fabric out of my way, kneeling on his mattress.

Wolves traveled in packs, but Clint walked with a confidence on this property that made me sure he knew how to deal with them. At least, I hoped.

But all the experience in the world wouldn't have prepared him for this.

Dozens of armed guards, carrying the blue and silver sigil of Highcrest across their armor-plated chests, emerged from the tree line. Some rode in on horses, carrying the crest on navy blue flags.

"Clint Collins?" A soldier with a metal helmet that held a single feather walked forward, a scroll gripped in his hand.

"Yes," Clint replied.

"You've been charged with stealing from the church, and subsequently, your Prince and the Crown."

Through the hazy, uneven glass, I watched Clint's throat bob at the declaration. My heart sank as the cold lashings of reality doled out their reprimanding punishment. Like a candle snuffed out, my light of hope sizzled into smoke.

Time to re-bury those hopes and dreams. This time, probably even deeper. I knew what came next; it was as predictable as the sun cresting at daybreak.

My spine weighed heavy with defeat when the soldier asked Clint, "Where is she?"

Mira

8 YEARS OLD

“Mira, time to wake up, my girl,” Mama’s voice called from behind the room divider. She stood over the furnace, using it as a stove, cooking her famous potato soup.

This house was much smaller than what we had before, but tension had settled over my hometown ever since that lady with the glowing hands came to visit, and my parents rushed us out in the middle of the night.

I hadn’t felt different, but people started acting strange. They visited more, started staring. Now I didn’t leave, even for school.

Spring had turned to summer in this new house, and I wondered if I’d get to play outside today, though I knew the answer. I stretched my sleepy muscles and released a drawn out yawn. The curtains remained closed, but sunlight shone around the edges. They had to stay shut, Mama said, even during the day. I didn’t like that about this new house.

“Are you hungry, sweetie? The soup should be ready in a few minutes.” Her up-swept bun gathered her hair out of her face, while loose strings of brown curls dangled down. Depending on the light, highlights of red would catch throughout. She sparkled like the sunshine in my eight-year-old eyes.

“Yes, Mama.” I put my slippers on, and my feet swished against the wood as I dragged myself to the washroom. It used to be an outhouse in the back, but Papa boarded up a new hallway so we wouldn’t have to go outside. Daylight filtered through the uneven cracks of the roughly nailed together boards.

I returned to sit at our small dining room table where I’d receive my school lesson. My elbow rested on the table while my palm supported my chin. My legs kicked and swayed, not able to touch the ground. The yummy smell of potatoes floated to my nose, and my tummy grumbled.

Raised voices outside stole our attention, and Mama turned her head to listen.

“Stay here,” she instructed. The spoon still spun around the rim when her steps carried her out the door.

I raced to the window and peered through the tiny gap in the curtain. I’d gotten good at sneaking peeks outside. Papa stood at our front fence, having some sort of disagreement with the man I’d recognized as his old boss.

Mama met the arguing men. Papa always said her calm and gentle spirit was a blessing, though not one by a witch. They seemed to settle their voices fairly quickly, but from what it looked like, they may still take a while.

An idea sparked in my brain, and my heart pounded with excitement. I kicked off my slippers and ran to the back of the house, exiting the door that led to the garden—one I was told not to use. When I burst through the confines, the sun washed over my face like an old friend, and a smile tugged on my lips.

My bare feet moved through the plush green grass, the softness convincing me this was heaven and I walked on clouds. After what felt like minutes of me laughing and jumping under the sun, I stopped.

A man watched from the path beyond our yard.

For moments, we remained still, eyes on one another. His eyes sparkled in a way I didn’t like. A way that meant he was very focused on me.

Mama rushed through the back gate, calling my name. She gasped when she saw the man. “Quickly, inside, sweetie.” I made no move to argue, and we funneled back inside where I received a long, stern lecture about the dangers of being seen.



“Love you too,” I said to my mama as she pressed a kiss to my forehead after tucking me in. Pinned to my side was my stuffed doggy, who had admittedly seen better days, but he was my best friend.

A sigh painted in sadness came from my mother, and she lightly brushed the hair out of my face. “I’m sorry we raised our voices with you earlier, Mirabelle. Your father and I are still trying to figure out how to cope with your new blessing. All we want is to keep you safe, alright?”

“Yes, Mama,” I replied.

Her eyes twinkled when she smiled.

“Now you get some rest, my love.” She pulled the flimsy divider between their bed and mine.

I rolled over, hugging my doggy.



The smell of smoke clogged my nostrils. Torn from sleep, I woke to Mama and Papa panicking. Jolting upright, I spotted the orange flames reaching under the front door, filling the air with black clouds.

The next moment, my mama was scooping me into her arms. “Come, Mira. We have to go.” She masked the terror in her voice well, but I could feel it in the strain her fingers had on me.

Papa placed his arms around us and dragged us to the back door. The moon barely gave off any light as we ran through the backyard.

The silhouette of our home glowed orange. Mama’s sudden scream sent a lashing of fear across my heart, and I turned to look over her shoulder.

A man with a thick ended club waited at the gate. Beneath him, Papa’s feet lay still in the grass. The man slowly lifted his gaze to Mama and me. The faint light revealed him—the man from earlier in the day.

A cold sweat broke over my body as we stood in a silent face-off. Dulled voices broke through the quiet night, but they were gathered near the front of the house. Back here, isolated, with Papa unconscious—or worse—felt like help was a kingdom away.

Then he stepped over Papa’s body, heading toward us.

“DON’T!” Mama held out a hand, anger in her voice she’d never used before.

I clutched her tighter, holding in my sobs.

“I don’t want to hurt you. I just want the girl,” he said, as if that rationale would be acceptable.

He came closer, and Mama moved. She rushed us over to the neighbor’s fence and set me down on the other side. “RUN, MIRA!” she cried.

The shocking rage in her voice sparked me into action. With doggy in hand, I darted across their lawn until I reached the other fence line. I climbed that one, too.

Looking back would be the moment that would forever haunt me, I just hadn’t known it at the time. The man retreated, exiting our yard to come after me, but Mama launched onto his back. I stood, frozen, hoping this would end. Papa would rise and they’d both rush to me, hold me in their arms and tell me I was safe.

Instead, he tossed Mama onto the ground like a sack of potatoes. He raised his club into the air, a flicker of moonlight glinting off the wet end, before he sent it crashing down. It sounded like it hit a pile of rocks.

Tears flowed down my cheeks in an endless stream. “Mama,” I whispered, willing her to rise to my view. The man kept moving, making his way into the alley and heading in my direction. His massive strides closed the distance quickly, and I knew my little legs couldn’t carry me fast enough.

I wouldn’t outrun him, so I headed to the nearest house and banged on the backdoor. I jiggled the knob, but it was locked. Looking over my shoulder, he’d already passed the next yard. If someone didn’t open this door within the next few seconds, he’d be here.

My fists banged over and over against the wood and doggy slipped from under my arm. I could hear his incoming steps behind me, so I let out a throat splitting scream for help.

His hand wrapped over my mouth before I could finish. “Shhh, it’s alright. I’m not going to hurt you. I just think you can

help me.”

My struggling didn't relent, but tears blurred my vision. His forceful grip pushed me out of the yard and into the alley. One last glimpse at the house I had grown to resent as it became swallowed in consuming fire.

And with it, everything I loved.



Mira



The cabin door burst open, revealing an armored soldier. My heart jolted from the outburst. Ready to comply, I scooched off the bed and stood, clasping my hands together.

Before he could make a move, I took delicate steps toward him, keeping my head low. I bid a silent goodbye to the cabin that moments ago held my freedom.

A dozen soldiers spanned the tree line with almost as many horses. Their gazes shot between one another when I stepped out. So many perceiving eyes had me wanting to find that wool blanket and cover myself. I continued at a steady, unassuming pace toward the group. Fighting only ever made things worse.

Three soldiers surrounded Clint, two of them grabbing his arms and holding them behind his back. As much as I tried to refrain from caring, my heart became sore. I hated that his daughters would now watch their sick father deteriorate in a prison cell.

A chime rang out across the leaf-laden soil as a soldier withdrew his sword. I didn't have time to process the action.

The soldier cut through Clint's abdomen in one smooth motion.

His eyes bulged, a vein on his forehead straining from the pain. I gasped, slapping my hands against my mouth. Blood dripped from the angled sword until the soldier ripped it from him. I stifled the scream climbing up my throat. I knew the Prince's army to be mighty, but seeing them up close made me realize they were equally ruthless.

Clint's knees buckled, his hulking frame tugging the soldiers down with him. They released him in an uncaring manner and he grasped at his wound, slamming into the forest floor. His hands wore his blood, like red mittens prepared for the coming snow.

My throat tightened, a lump rising—no, not a lump. Words. "I'm sorry!" Tears blurred him as my words catapulted into the clearing.

All I saw before me was a father fighting for his daughters, caught in the snares of a spell I couldn't control.

"I'm sorry, Red," Clint groaned while he writhed on the grassy bed—his final resting place.

Soldiers grabbed my upper arms and hauled me toward the horses. I wanted to say more to Clint, to tell him he'd treated me kindly, that his stew wasn't terrible, that I appreciated all the fires he kept lit.

That I would have helped him if I could.

But my new captors had me in their possession, and so my calculated captivity had to begin.

Everything I wanted to say fizzled down to heart wrenching guilt and choking regret when Clint's movements faded until he lay perfectly still.

Tears fell from my eyes without permission, filling with every recurring wound of my life until they spilled. This was why I never asked for their name. Why did he have to tell me his name?

His fate had been sealed the moment he stepped into that hall of worship, and another lesson I'd learned was that you can't change fate.

And that *prick*, as he'd called himself, had to go and give me hope. The one thing I promised myself never to have again. It rests delicately in my hands like glass. And when it inevitably shatters, my fists squeeze tight, not wanting to let go, leaving the broken shards to slice into me, inflicting wounds deeper than if I had never dared to hope at all.

I knew the anger I felt wasn't directed at him. I grieved for him. The anger was toward a fate that brought me to this moment time and time again. Tactics and approaches could only last so long before the cycle continued. Eventually someone would come along, who didn't hurt me, and if I wasn't hard as stone by the time my new captors came calling, I'd suffer their loss.

I suffered for Clint, maybe more than any of the others. He didn't take me for riches, or youth. His intentions weren't selfish, even if the actions were monstrous.

My feet lost connection with the ground as I was hoisted onto a horse. I squeezed my eyes tight, bracing the heels of my palms over the massive beast's shoulders to hold myself up, to keep from crumbling.

A soldier held the reins from the ground, controlling the horse. Orders and commands were issued among the men, but my ears thrummed with the wail of loss.

Within moments, the beast swayed beneath me as I was led into the woods. I clamored to make my way back from the depths of despair.

“It will take a couple hours to get back to base camp,” the soldier leading my reins said.

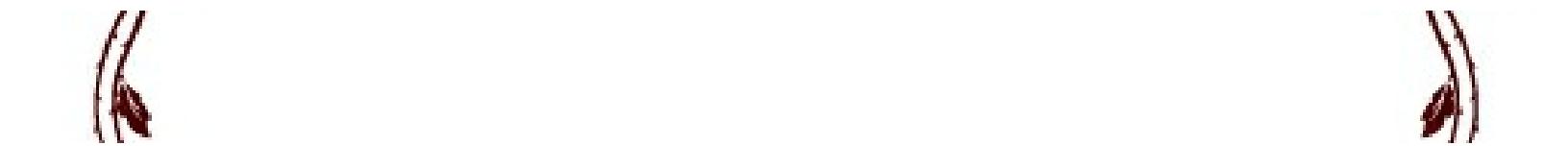
My head breached the drowning waters of grief to piece the situation together. “Who wants me?” Was it these men? An army general? An entire camp?

“The prince,” he said.

The nearly dead lump in my chest hammered against my lungs, stealing my ability to breathe calmly. Sure, I’d had captors of somewhat high ranks, but this was the top of the chain. A prince. A prince who commanded his men to murder for what he wanted.

If my actual magic couldn’t grant the prince’s desire, I imagined the next person to be run through with a sword would be me.

Mira



After three days, I still hadn't grown any more comfortable with how large this escorting party was. In my experience, more people knowing my location served to make any situation more precarious. That uneasiness only heightened once we entered Sunvale, the second most populated city in Highcrest.

I secured the hood of the cloak they'd provided, pinching it tightly under my chin while letting enough hang over the top so that if I kept my head down, no one could see my face.

Merchants and villagers swarmed around each other like bees in a hive. Some walked alone, carrying baskets overflowing with the leafy tops of freshly picked vegetables. Others walked in groups, chatting about their lives and upcoming plans boisterously enough that I heard it all clearly. They all seemed so...unburdened.

While doing my best to stay hidden, unnoticed, unimportant, I visually drank in the items and wares on display. Quality and craftsmanship reigned supreme in the markets closer to the castle where the city held more wealth than lower laying towns. Skilled hands prepared blankets and carvings, some more decorative than useful. A thought brushed my mind, wondering if any of the vendors possessed magic to create them.

Maybe it was desperation to know others like me existed. Not that our circumstances could compare. People were all *too* accepting of my magic while most had to keep theirs hidden. I supposed I, too, kept my magic hidden. My *real* magic. For the same reasons they did.

In the distance, Highcrest Castle sat atop a hill, overlooking its people. Only one city remained between it and me.

My spine straightened and tensed. Breathing became more difficult. I'd gotten used to being stolen. Knew the process and how to bide my time until the next. But the castle spearing the sky in the distance, looking down on me with quiet malice, whispered about a future within its walls in a voice I didn't recognize.

Finality, perhaps.

People knew royals for their extravagance and wealth. I couldn't understand why a man who already had everything would need me.

It'd taken a long time to recognize what my actual blessing entailed. Being so young when it happened, coupled with the whirlwind of events that followed, never gave me a clear understanding. Mini, self-imposed tests throughout the years clarified my abilities, but I doubted I had anything to offer a prince. And if I couldn't offer anything of value, no amount of quiet refrain would save me.

The possibility of this being my final chapter aroused a storm in my soul. gray clouds swarmed my spirit, and with every breath going forward, I knew I'd anticipate a strike of lightning or rattle of thunder—one wrong word or move could be the act that would end it all.

Waiting for death carried an ominous weight.

The saddest part was this wasn't the most scared I'd ever felt. A small part of me wondered if maybe I could finally rest. A blissful peace beckoned beyond mortality. An escape from repeating circumstances that'd plagued my entire life. Maybe this was how the gods would finally show their mercy.

Our procession came to a stop in front of a multiple story high inn. "We're stopping here for the night." Miles, the soldier assigned to stay by my side, led the horse to a post and secured it.

Above the entrance, The Sleeping Stag's wooden sign swayed in the passing breeze.

"We're to accommodate you here tonight, to prepare you to meet the prince tomorrow. The men and horses need rest before the final hours of travel." Miles extended his arms, the signal for me to dismount.

My legs wobbled when they hit the ground. They'd gone numb some time ago from the many hours on horseback. Thank the gods for this break.

I peered around, taking in the sights and sounds of a busy market. Children ran freely in the streets, playing tag, while their

mothers swatted at them, scolding them to behave. Their laughter blocked out the instruction, the grins on their faces never wavering as they jovially carried on.

A smile pulled on my lips as I admired their carefree disposition. Weeks away from civilization had me feeling grateful to be here.

“Well, there’s something I didn’t think I’d see,” Miles said, stealing my attention. He wore an astonished kind of smirk.

I stared at his blue eyes beneath his rogue chestnut curls, furrowing my brow in question.

“A genuine smile.”

His words carried a surprising amount of weight when they barreled into me. I hadn’t felt much of anything since Clint died. Not even fear about heading to the prince until the looming castle finally came into view.

Guilt twisted my every breath, knowing Clint wasn’t around to smile at the raucous children like I knew he would have. It wasn’t hard to imagine that big, lumbering man lowering to all fours, pretending to be a horse so his daughters could play.

The thought would have been comforting if it weren’t plagued by grief.

An awkward silence hung between us before Miles gestured for me to enter the inn.

Rafters and beams outlined the sloped roof that featured a giant chandelier made of intertwining antlers. Candles in brown tinged jars hung from the middle, making the blonde wood roof glow with warm light.

I stopped in the center, indulging in the sight. It’d been...maybe my entire life that I’d ever entered such a put together establishment. Perks of being the prince’s prisoner, I guessed. Other soldiers collapsed in chairs in the lobby area, groaning over their aching muscles.

Miles brushed past me to the clerk’s desk. They exchanged some words, but I focused on the elegant features of the room, waiting for my next instruction.

A few chairs and small round tables decorated the lobby. I checked to ensure my cloak kept me concealed even though the only patrons were the guardsmen I’d traveled with. Habit.

“This way.” Miles nodded to the staircase on the far right of the room.

We climbed the stairs to the next floor. Miles walked to the last room at the end of the hall. He inserted a key and stood back from the opened door, an invitation for me to enter.

The sizable room, where a plush bed sat behind a folded room divider, gave me pause.

No secured area for me to sleep.

Chairs to my right faced a hefty fireplace with a thick, polished wooden mantle, hosting a variety of knickknacks. Peering to my left, I bit my lip when I spotted the ivory, cast iron clawfoot tub. Internally, I frowned. My aching muscles desperately wanted to soak, but I wouldn’t be comfortable using it with no privacy under guarding eyes.

Miles squatted before the hearth, sparking a match. He stood after the crackling became loud and consistent. “The entire kingdom talks about The Coveted.” His words turned reverent as his gaze drifted to me, like he couldn’t believe he stood in my presence.

I’d come to expect certain looks from people. Learned to decipher the glimmer that resided in their eyes. Some were mesmerized, others greedy. To the entire kingdom, I was nothing but a good luck charm, bringing blessings and good fortune to all I was near, if I was there long enough.

A small smile appeared on his face as he released a deep breath. “I’m glad I’ve been able to be around you. I’m sorry you were taken by that man. You deserved better.” His smile tightened. “I’ll be on guard at the end of the hall. Here, give me your cloak.”

I removed the shapeless, heavy thing from my shoulders and handed it over, all while avoiding his intent gaze.

“Call if you need anything.” Then he left the room with a bow, closing the door behind him.

My emotions pulled in different directions. He pitied me for having been with Clint, but it wasn’t so bad. Was it? Clint never hurt me. He’d talk to me about whatever he did. Chopping the carrots, he’d talk about the harvest, or the rabbits that stole a bunch from the garden. Lighting the fire, he’d talk about how grateful he was to be warm after long hours spent in dark caves.

Then the soldiers came and *murdered* him. Just when he was about to let me free. Should that outweigh that he’d snatched me in the first place?

I scrubbed at my face, burying my frustration in my palms. I tried to take steady breaths as the swarming thoughts encircled like vultures to a carcass. Then I realized something amazing.

I was alone.

My sights immediately landed on the opulent oval tub. The thought of soaking in hot water became my number one focus. Bathing with a bowl of cold water and a rag for weeks could only do so much for a girl.

A tiny, high-pitched squeal formed in my throat as I charged for the tub and cranked the hot water faucet. My fingers fumbled at my buttons, frantically trying to remove the layers from my body.

I pulled off my dirty, sullen dress that resembled a burlap sack with all the caked on dirt, then shimmied off my stockings and lifted my shift. I stood bare, the curve of my breasts skimming lightly over my ribs. The pouch of my stomach against my small frame made me thankful I’d had enough food to not go hungry during the travel here.

I lifted my foot to dip it in the running water. Heat seared my skin in the best way, burning and melting away the grimy residue that lacquered my skin and my soul.

Angling my face toward the gods, I breathed out a grateful prayer. I lifted my other leg and stepped in, eager to surround myself in the depths of cleansing warmth. I dropped against the back of the tub while whirls of steam kissed my skin.

The water's scorching edge teased my ivory skin as it rose inch by inch. I extended my legs, noting patches of blues, greens and purples that decorated them now. Not having to traverse those woods on my own feet was nice, but riding horseback for so long was no easy feat, either. If I never trudged through a forest again, I'd die happy.

A tear slipped down my cheek, one that I hadn't even known threatened to fall. For some reason, in this moment where I could sit and breathe without expectation on my shoulders, I grieved. For Clint. For myself.

Images of smiling children in the market came to mind, and the pit in my stomach grew. It'd been so long since I ran around, carefree, under the loving watch of my parents.

That seemed like a whole lifetime ago...

Once the water covered my shoulders, I turned off the tap, took a deep breath, then completely sunk beneath. It drowned out the world and carried away my tears. The pressure of the water surrounded me like a hug, the feeling almost foreign.

A mounting burn built in my chest, and I cursed my need for air.

I broke above the water with a gasp and quickly glanced around, ensuring I was still alone. A beautiful glass bottle rested beside the tub, and curiosity swelled. I pulled off the stopper to find a lovely floral smelling hair soap. I poured the oil into my palm and began lathering my long hair.

A cloud of bubbles soon appeared as my fingers worked their way around my head, massaging every inch. A strong lilac and lavender scent mingled with the steam and filled my lungs. It chased away the lingering memories that clung to me of the damp forest, of a dingy old cabin.

An octagonal window took up the wall above the tub and I peered toward the noon sky, silently thanking the gods.

I got out when the water cooled, wrapping myself in the oversized, luxurious towel that'd been folded on the floor.

My mood felt lighter, like the bath had washed away some of my pain. I gathered my bright red hair over my shoulder and rung out the water into the tub. The natural waves in my hair took shape, even sopping wet. After thoroughly wringing the excess water, my gaze snagged on the alluring, pillow bed. A bed big enough for two people.

Sage green sheets and a floral bedspread with mostly red accents cocooned and beckoned me to rest. Excitement fluttered inside me, and I raced to it, not wanting to wait even a second longer to throw myself into its cushiony embrace. I jumped, twisting in the air to land on my back. The bedding cradled me like a cloud after my body finished bouncing. A tiny giggle escaped me, the sound strange to my ears.

I spread my limbs across the entire thing, basking in the unrestricted space. Before I could even decide, I found myself crawling under the linens and piling the heavy blankets on top.

As quickly as my eyes shut, they flung open again, a thought occurring. I was in the heart of a city with a group of guards to protect me. No one was keeping me sheltered in a cellar, locked in a shed, or tucked away in a basement. I didn't know what the castle would do with me when I arrived or if I could provide what the prince was looking for. After all, I'd seen how he handles thieves. I didn't want to imagine how he'd treat someone he thought was holding back from giving him what he wanted.

If I could have a last wish before my untimely end, I knew what it would be.

Mira



Thankfully, a fresh set of clothes awaited me. The fabric held no holes, frays, or stains, and fit my body well.

I'd raked my fingers through my hair before the heat of the fire to dry it faster, my nerves building with each passing second. I was about to break my own carefully curated rules. But since the guardsmen weren't technically my captors, did I need to be so strict? Regardless, I'd decided.

I reached for the door handle, but hesitated. My fingers withdrew, curling into my palm. My chest hollowed, accentuating every nervous beat that pounded inside it. As much as I tried to prepare myself, I knew it'd feel like lashings to my already scarred heart if he said no. I closed my eyes and exhaled loudly.

I had to try.

I pried my eyes open and wrapped my fingers around the brass handle. The grooves of the embellishments pressed into my firm grip, and I swallowed down my apprehension.

I pulled back the door and peered into the hallway. Cool air rushed against my face, a whisper on my skin to continue.

One monumental step brought me into the hall. I wanted to run, to leap and bound in the corridor because I hadn't been locked in somewhere.

Voices trickling out of a room at the end of the hall gave me pause. They were barely audible from the distance, but enough that I listened.

“More magic wielders in that castle. It’s the last thing we need.”

More? Who had magic at the castle? The thought of being around others with magic made me feel less alone. Less different.

I couldn't hear the other side of the conversation, but judging from the disgruntled tone, I didn't get the sense they thought it was a good thing. I had to know what they were saying.

Delicate steps carried me gracefully down the aged green carpet runner, creaking the wood underneath my feet. I froze.

The door the voices had come from was open, and the unsettling wood called out to one of its residents like an alarm.

Miles popped his head out, checking both directions before his eyes landed on me. “Is everything okay?” He angled his head down, eyes wide, waiting intently for me to say something, his confusion quickly turning into concern.

There was no way I could catch more of the conversation now. Instead of remaining still with a guilty look on my face, I recalled my original reason for stepping out here.

“I’d like to go to the market.” The volume of my voice probably came out louder than necessary.

“The market?” Miles asked, the words dragging slowly from his lips with one eyebrow cocked.

“Yes.” I threw on a small smile, hoping it was distraction enough for my eavesdropping.

“Is there something you need? I can send someone to g—”

“No!” I cut him off. “I want to go to the market. Not for anything. Just... to go.” Embarrassment crept across my cheeks at the pathetic plea.

The way his posture straightened then relaxed, and the pity that flashed in his eyes, told me he'd heard it too. I had a hard time keeping my eyes up, and nerves had me chewing my bottom lip. Each second stretched for an eternity as I waited for the crushing blow of rejection. Would he ever say something?

Returning to my room now would only leave me there to stew over what awaited me at the castle. I wanted to find the magic wielders, see what their treatment was like, what they provided the prince. Maybe it would give me some hints as to how I could bide my time.

To my surprise, Miles said, “I think we can do that.”



When the lobby came into view, six guards stood ready.

Surrounded by a cluster of guardsmen—not the freedom I'd envisioned moments ago when I'd asked.

Miles approached from behind. "They'll head out in three sets of two, lingering near, but not close enough that people will think they're with you. Standing around you would draw too much attention. No one knows you're here, and we'd like to keep it that way, so keep a low profile."

I nodded beneath the oversized hood of my cloak. This was going better than I imagined. Not only was I about to experience a market without limitations, but I would get to do it without someone looming over me. My toes wiggled in my boots, the most outward excitement I would let myself show.

The guards exchanged looks with Miles, and the first two left the inn. Then the next pair. The remaining guards parted for me, and I guessed they would be the ones trailing behind.

I stepped outside among the throng of villagers roaming the streets. A set of the prince's soldiers waited on either side, but didn't hover near the door. I caught glimpses of their blue and silver embroidered emblems through the gingly passing crowd who paid them no attention.

The smell of mud hung in the air from the wet ground. A choir of voices filled with regular conversation, disagreements, and laughter surrounded me. People, simply living. And I stood in their midst, as if this was *my* normal, too.

Carts and stalls lined pathways between the established shops. Strings of encased meat wrapped along the frame of one, while another served loaves of bread bundled in cloth.

A vendor peddled his wooden animal figurines to those who strayed close enough. Another woman sat quietly at her booth of woven mittens and scarves, not needing to draw attention from the masses. With winter coming, her business needed no attention-grabbing display of salesmanship.

A small man, standing no more than four feet tall, gray strands peppering his dark hair, called to me, "Miss! Miss. You must be in need." He presented vials gripped between each of his fingers. "Wormswood, to fight off the winter ills. Or avocado oil for when your skin cracks and bleeds. Perhaps a tincture of elderberry, to ward off the season's cough?"

He held the glass vials closer with each suggestion, assuming that something he'd say would catch my interest.

Fear clogged my throat. I pinched my hood tighter. "I'm sorry, I have no coin." I shrugged under the layer of wool fabric that entombed me, keeping my face partially blocked beneath the draping fabric. If he stepped closer, he might catch a glimpse of my hair. My body stiffened.

"Gah." He scoffed, crinkling his forehead while shooing me away before turning his attention to the next potential customer.

Butterflies soared in my chest. Rarely did people seem unaffected by my blessing. I had yet to understand why some looked at me as if I held their future in my hands while others acted like this.

He continued his pushy speech to another, as if I'd never been there.

I beamed as I walked deeper into the crowded market, my steps lighter. A woman bumped into my shoulder, causing me to stumble slightly.

"Watch it," she barked, deep lines of irritation creasing her brow. I said nothing as I watched her storm away. She, too, left me behind without another thought. I bit my lip to stifle the laughter that wanted to bubble out of me.

But from the corner of my eye, one of the guards moved his hand to rest on the hilt of his sheathed sword. He'd been ready to intercept if someone made a move on the *Prince's Coveted*. My blood chilled, and I couldn't help but scout the woman still barging through the crowd to ensure she was okay. She could have been harmed from an act so simple most wouldn't even think twice.

I needed to take more care. As much as I craved to be one of them, I wasn't. I made sure to keep my distance as I continued, the autumn chill sinking further into my bones. The crowd thinned as the street of stalls opened up to a wide circle, displays and stands littered throughout.

A string of children ran by. At first glance, I thought it nothing more than fun and games. Then I noticed a larger boy catch one who'd been fleeing. He tossed him to the ground, sending the smaller one's hat tumbling into the mud.

My heart pained at the sight. If I were someone else, I would intervene. I'd help the defenseless boy to his feet, pluck his dirty hat off the ground, and clean it off as best I could. I wouldn't leave him to feel beaten down by the world.

But I wasn't someone who could help. I had no power to make a difference in his life, or anyone's. Not even my own. I needed to keep to myself, to go unnoticed by the masses. The hat remained dirty and left behind as I carried on into the market.

The haggling frenzy continued, arguments over returning items being the most heated among the voices. I stopped and grazed the pelts on display at one stand, and admired the seasonal fruit baskets at another. My eyes lingered much longer on the

emerald and jade gemstone display.

Varying hues of green veins running across the smooth, shiny surfaces reminded me of my mother's eyes. If I could see my own eyes, I would have that reminder more often.

"We are drawn to them for their beauty reminds us of the natural world around us, no?" an inquiring voice probed beside me. A shoulder nudged me gently, and I looked down at a petite, hunching frame. Her silver hair flowed out from underneath her hood, long and straight. The deep wrinkle lines on her face stretched around her eyes and wide-spanning smile.

"Yes, I suppose they do." I offered a curt smile in reply as I put a bit of space between us. I had no doubt the guardsmen nearby readied their weapons.

We stood silent for a moment, admiring the collection.

"Or because they remind us of loved ones since passed."

My gaze shot to her. This time she stared directly back, her eyes an unnatural amethyst I hadn't noticed before.

A witch.

My chest constricted. The world around me quieted, as if she and I stood suspended in time.

"Now, now, little gem. Don't you fret. Your blessing has no effect on me." She winked.

My feet rooted to the ground, unable to move. She knew who I was. More than that, she knew *about* me. No one knew *about* me, not in the ways that truly mattered.

"If it reminds you of her, you should buy it." She pointed her chin toward the display.

I went to speak, but my mouth faltered.

"I know, I know. No coin." She bobbed her head and shrugged, as if I'd given her that same excuse ten times before.

"How—" I could only manage a stilted whisper.

"Oh, little gem. When you've lived as long as I have, you learn a thing or two." Her leathery spotted hand reached out to pluck the stone I'd stared at the longest. "Add this to my tab, Lorelai."

The vendor glanced over and nodded in acknowledgment.

"Here." The old woman faced me, offering the stone from the palm of her hand. "Take it. Traveling from place to place takes a toll. May this help you feel a piece of *home*."

She somehow found my hand despite the overhanging cloak and forced it into my palm. What *couldn't* she see? I closed my hand around it, letting the cloak eat up the rock.

A gift. Something that belonged to me. I'd never had something I could take with me besides the clothes on my back. "H-how can I repay you?"

A knowing smile spread over her gentle features, highlighting the years of life she wore on her skin. "From one wisdom giver to another...try looking beyond what the world presents to you. We like to think we learn the ways of the gods, but they keep us on our toes." She pinched her mouth closed, warmth emanating from her upwardly curved expression. She clasped her hands around mine, squeezing tight before leaving my side.

I couldn't process fast enough, remaining frozen in a stupor and staring at my closed hand. The others I'd interacted with at the market didn't know who I was. This woman, on the other hand, knew *exactly* who I was. Despite that, she'd treated me normally, completely unphased by my magic. She'd even given me a gift. My heart stuttered over the feeling.

Unfurling my hand, the beautiful emerald stone rested atop the heavy gray wool. To remind me of my mother. Of home.

A memory played before me, a vision of my mother's smiling face, her sparkling eyes. My own stung with heat, and I sniffed softly, attempting to regain my composure before it broke.

I glanced from underneath my hood toward the crowd to take another look at the mysterious old woman, but she'd already disappeared. Dropping my gaze back to the stone, I clutched the cloak around it, securing it in my hand through the thick fabric, a silent promise to never let it go.

"Are you alright?" Miles appeared beside me.

He'd been so stealthy I forgot he was following me.

"Y-yes." I straightened, trying to portray a calm demeanor, though inside I still reeled.

"The inn is going to serve dinner soon. We should get back," he said.

Shouts and chaos erupted from a nearby vendor, knocking over a barrel of barley that flooded the sodden ground. Accusations flew like arrows, followed by fists. Miles' hand pinned my shoulder, an order not to move. Other guardsmen who'd been inconspicuously roaming ran toward the action, inserting themselves to break up the altercation.

"What's going on here?" one guard shouted, demanding answers once the quarreling men had been separated.

An accusatory finger pointed toward the offender. "He used magic to douse my leathers!"

The man held an unapologetic smile, blood leaking from his split lip. "Should have refunded my money, you scheming thief."

Hushed chatter regarding magic wielding in public ripped through the observing crowd. Those with magic kept it hidden for this reason, for the mass hysteria that brews at its very mention.

The leather maker's stall was dripping. Two more guardsmen broke through the gathered crowd, one hosting a jagged scar

down the side of his face. "Thank you, tanner, for reporting the misuse of magic." The scarred guard nodded to his men, who promptly dragged the accused away.

He placed his hand on the leather maker's shoulder. "Any spottings of magic, you report to battalion thirty-two." The way he held the man's stare seemed more threat than anything. Yet, the tanner nodded, straightening himself, adjusting his clothes and hair, careful not to touch the bruise blooming across his cheek.

I'd thought I wanted a day at the market, to live for maybe an hour as regular citizens do. But even they aren't granted peace as long as magic is in their blood. Suddenly, I craved the seclusion of my room at the inn. Why my parents would think it a blessing for me to possess magic was beyond me. It was only a curse.

And if someone discovered my secret, I shuddered to think how much worse my life would become—if it continued at all.



Mira



I suspected this would be the last time I traveled with captors. Once I stepped behind those castle walls, I would never leave. Unless they bury the bodies of those who don't impress the prince outside the walls, then maybe once more.

A cold holding cell in the dungeon? Shared with other prisoners? A secluded shed on the grounds, under constant guard? I didn't know what the prince had planned for me, but today, I'd find out.

Flipping the covers off exposed my white-laced shift, yet another new garment provided by my traveling party. A new dress also lay folded on the desk. *Prepare myself for the prince*, Miles had instructed. That's probably why we stopped at the inn at all, so I would have a chance to clean myself up. I hadn't been in a presentable condition when they'd found me, since Clint had to walk such a long way to the river he gathered our bathing water from, and certainly not after being on the road for a few days.

Make myself pretty for a doomed destiny, that was the task of the morning. It bound me somewhere in the middle of paralyzing fear and relief. Maybe an ending to it all wouldn't be so bad.



Rocking back and forth over the white dusted, muddy, uneven roads, I peered out the carriage window.

Villagers performed their early morning tasks in a way I'd never been able to see. A woman dressed her garden in chicken feed, while the animals pecked and bobbed for their meal. Young people shook out blankets into the street, slapping at the fabric to remove dust. A small boy with a hat too big for him ran around, passing papers and yelling the day's headline.

Why couldn't I have had a normal life? I exhaled, releasing the bitterness that wrapped its boney fingers around my heart. I had to keep my head clear.

The carriage tilted on the sloped incline that had now turned to cobblestones. Every tug of the horses pulled on my heart, matching the sinking feeling in my gut. Gravity fought against them like my worries fought against me.

We trekked to Waterview, the main city outside the castle walls. Street after street we crawled upward, passing business after business, park after park. We'd passed a few open market areas, just like the one we traveled past now, when something I'd never seen caught my eye.

It sent my stomach tossing like an unruly tempest. Snippets of conversations past had me recognizing the stocks, the noose, and, wearing an outfit so dark it seemed cursed by the light, the executioner.

Royal guardsmen unlocked a man bound by the hands and ankles. Despite his protests, they lurched him forward, his bare feet attempting to dig into the cold, muddy ground in resistance.

Tear my gaze away, lose my breakfast, watch with unwavering focus. I couldn't come to a decision. This man's life was about to end, and it was horrifying to witness. When they reached the base of the platform, the view cut off as the carriage rolled on.

I threw myself back against the cushioned seat, shutting my eyes tight. Could the same fate have befallen that water wielder? How long until that was me? The tools in my arsenal might work for a while, but after that...

Exceptionally fortified stone constituted the tall wall that surrounded the castle grounds. I'd only ever seen it from afar. Square-cut rocks of an impressive size dusted with age that had seen sun and rain and war gave a foreboding warning for any who dared act against the prince. Equal parts challenge and promise that no one unwanted would enter.

Or perhaps leave.

Our horses came to a stop while soldiers spoke in muffled conversation to the posted guards.

I took in the surroundings of the outside city one last time before the carriage yanked forward, forcing me to cross that stony threshold.

My stomach churned. I had to fight the urge to spill the berries from breakfast. We passed guardsmen at the gate, dozens more appearing as we entered.

After a few minutes of traveling through the inner town's market, we reached another fortified barrier. The scale of my captivity had never been so big—not that I'd fought against even the weakest of my jailors.

Clint had mentioned during some of his ramblings that those in power would destroy and lay waste to anything that threatened their fortune, and that thought echoed louder in my mind the closer we got.

I represented access to greater fortunes. The scale of a prince's desire must be vastly more grand than any captor prior. So how much harsher would his unsatisfied wrath be?

My thoughts returned to the man who probably swung from that noose at this very moment, still and lifeless. What had been his crime? Was he perceived as a threat simply for having magic in his veins? If it was discovered that my magic wasn't all the rumors claimed, how quickly would I be deemed the same? My heart's steady rhythm pounded in my ears.

The carriage jostled abruptly, pulling forward and startling my nerves. Loud clacking reverberating off the drawbridge rang out like thunder in the small wooden enclave.

A moat bordered the secondary wall. Undisturbed cerulean water appeared as glass as we crossed over it, a mirror held against the brightening sky above.

Such detailed planning to secure the safety of this building. Why hadn't the gods protected me with the same vigor the architects of this castle did?

These walls would stand long after I didn't. Long after the world wrung me like a towel to squeeze every drop of a blessing it could manage.

We passed thick chains attaching the drawbridge to the castle—felt like I wore a similar set around my soul.

The carriage door opened to reveal one soldier silently commanding me to exit. I took a deep breath before forcing myself off the cushioned bench, ducking beneath the doorframe.

My feet landed on the stone, and for the first time, I grasped the scale of the grand structure. The white-washed gray stones climbed to the clouds, the tips of the spires essentially grazing the fluffy white masses above.

I'd never felt as small as I did standing before a castle that perfectly represented how powerless I was to ever fight against my destiny. With no choices and nowhere else to go, I looked toward the half dozen soldiers waiting to escort me inside.

Welcome to the end.

They formed around me like a shield when I stepped forward. Three on either side guided me down corridors as long as city streets. Torch sconces splashed orange light against neutral painted walls with carved wooden finishes. Detailed oil paintings hung in intricate frames of gold and silver.

Some were portraits of royals, others landscapes or scenes from battles long ago. Victories hard won by bloodshed and loss. I swatted away the clambering thoughts that once word spread about Prince Nicholas possessing The Coveted, other kings and leaders might invade with their armies and inflict damages like in these paintings.

No, surely I'd meet my end before then.

As we descended deeper into the belly of the castle, it roared to life with elegance, warmth, and beauty. Not one detail was clumsy amidst the collection of tables and trinkets spread against embellished carvings on the walls depicting leaves, vines, and chalices.

Navy blue runners stretched before me like a dark ocean wanting to swallow me whole. More guards waited at a set of oversized double wooden doors, light reflecting off their pristine, shiny armor.

It was brighter within the confines of the castle than outside, leaving no shadows for me to hide behind. I gulped down my rising apprehension.

They removed my cloak, stripping me of the last layer of protection against the world, leaving me with no asylum, no escape. The grand set of doors opened before me, groaning on their hinges—a low, sullen moaning that could have come from the depths of my soul.

Elegantly dressed women stood in a crowd mixed with castle workers and esteemed gentlemen split on either side of our runway. Whispers and conversations started as they watched me enter, their eyes boring into me with feverish intensity.

My lungs stiffened, making it difficult to breathe. I'd spent my life hiding, or being hid, and this spotlight of attention sent a message to my brain: run.

But destiny spared me no grace, and the second I hesitated, armored hands urged me forward.

I stared at my feet, doubting the stability of every step in this endless procession as I sank further into my fate. We halted once we reached the end of the aisle runner, and a castle worker shouted from beside where our group stood. I flinched.

"Your Majesty, Prince Nicholas Charmant of Highcrest, the gods have smiled down upon you, blessing you, and therefore the entire kingdom, with The Coveted!"

Simultaneously, on some unspoken cue, the six guards around me stepped to the side, revealing a clear path from me to the prince. I quickly averted my gaze, dropping it to the floor.

The crowd fell silent. I considered that my short, stunted breathing was heard by every person in attendance, but I couldn't calm myself. My face burned as if being held near an open flame, knowing the eyes of the prince fell upon me.

The tips of his shoes came into view as he stood about a foot away.

"Hello, Miss." The softness of his greeting took me by surprise, and my head shot up.

With how quietly he spoke, I wasn't sure anyone else could truly hear. "I hope your journey wasn't terribly taxing." Blue eyes sparkled above a gentle smile on his golden complexion. His hair glittered in the sun, as if golden thread grew from him. He held no air of intimidation—until I took in the crown crusted with jewels, a reminder of who stood before me.

My breathing slowed, as if being spotted by a predator. I may as well have been encased in ice, I stood equally as still.

Years of training took hold. *Stay quiet. Remain an enigma.*

I rehearsed the beats I'd become familiar with, though I questioned if these tactics were appropriate here. What method would protect me in this situation? My perception of everything crumbled beneath my feet, sending me into a freefall with nothing to grab on to.

Maintaining his smile, he gave a curt nod, then took a step back. No anger or malice shadowed his features, despite my insulting silence.

"This marks a glorious day for our kingdom. With the blessings of the gods on our side, Highcrest will work to serve its people until all bellies are full and all faces hold smiles." He gave a strong nod to the crowd, voice projected for all to hear.

Thundering applause surrounded me, and I shrank into my shoulders. The prince stepped forward amidst the cheers.

"I'm having a dinner prepared in your honor tonight. Would that be alright with you, Miss...?" He dipped his head to meet my eyeline.

I'd have to pick my battles. The last thing I wanted was to anger this man immediately upon my arrival.

Forcing my name was difficult, like trudging through deep snow. I'd trained myself to keep quiet, to maintain distance, and not draw attention. But here I stood, in the heart of Highcrest's castle, singled out in a room full of people, being addressed by the prince.

"Mira." I hadn't heard the sound of my name in years, let alone said it.

"Lovely to meet you, Miss Mira. I hope your adjustment is easy. I've heard details about your journey here. You must be exhausted. Take all the time you need to settle this afternoon, and I shall see you later this evening." The top of his head came into view as he bowed, a gesture I didn't anticipate or know what to do with.

Royalty stood before me, and unless I wanted to wake up face down in that moat, I'd better properly comply. My ankles bent awkwardly before my knees did, performing a shaky, uneven curtsey.

"Please escort Miss Mira to her chambers," Prince Nicholas instructed his men.

Within an instant, the guardsmen sharply turned one-hundred-eighty degrees, now facing the door we'd entered through. I followed suit, grasping my silky soft floral dress with my increasingly sweaty palms. The fabric wrinkled in my hands was the only solid thing I held onto as we walked back down the aisle.

I wanted to reach for my newly gifted stone, but I'd tucked it between my cleavage and wouldn't dig it out in front of an audience. Fawning awe's and thunderous clapping topped the jovial conversation as the crowd studied my exit.

I kept my head down, wishing we would pick up the pace so I could depart from their gazes quicker. The backs of my eyes warmed, threatening to spill my rising anxiety down my cheeks. There was no safety with an abundance of people knowing my whereabouts.

Any person in that room could be plotting to take me or hurt me to get what they want. Even the soldiers surrounding me. Suddenly, the ring of protection shifted from safe to suspicious.

After winding down corridors and climbing stairwells, the guards stopped in front of a room. One pushed open the double doors, and I could barely believe my eyes. A massive bed with golden-plated posts topped with swimming yellow fabric for a canopy sat center focus. My jaw dropped. I'd thought the room at the inn was nice.

Unable to stop my wandering eyes from taking in the luxury that dripped from every surface, I barely noticed my feet had taken me inside. To my right, elegant sitting chairs and matching seafoam green sofa faced a massive lit fireplace that breathed a comforting warmth on my skin. A rug with the brightest colors woven into intricate patterns covered the floor in front of it. The ceiling climbed much higher than a ceiling should, and the wood that framed it looked like it'd been carved into braids.

A massive ironwork chandelier hung from a precariously thin chain in the middle, but the lit candles gave it an ethereal glow, as if suspended from the heavens. On the left wall was a dresser so large that even if I laid down in front of it, it would stretch longer. Hand-painted around the sides and converging over the drawers was a landscape mural of green rolling fields with colorful flowers sitting in front of a mountain scape. A gorgeous tri-fold mirror vanity sat beside the dresser, and the pillow topped stool that tucked underneath it matched the yellow from the bed and the gold plating of the vanity.

Clinking armor faded from earshot, but a clearing throat called my attention back. I turned to face the guard.

"The prince wishes to make you feel comfortable here." His eyes gestured behind me, and I followed his line of sight.

A maid appeared from a doorway I hadn't seen before on the other side of the vanity. Her dark blue dress with a white apron and matching hat piece identified her position as staff. She held a towel draped over her hands and gestured into the space from where she'd appeared. I gathered it was a bathing chamber.

My stare fixed on the built-in shelves on the other side of the bed that I hadn't noticed before and the dozens of old, dusty books that filled them. The second I was left alone, I was going to scour each one.

I cast my gaze toward the long, thin window that glowed with daylight between the bed and the bathroom and sent a thank you to the gods. I may not have long left, but at least I wasn't in a dungeon.

Mira



The maid added potions into the bath, and the aroma of fresh oranges hit my nose. The bubbles on the water's surface cloaked my nakedness, and this deep tub allowed the warm water to sit above my shoulders. Occasionally, I'd have to breaststroke my way out of the soapy suds, or else they'd suffocate me.

"Is that all, Miss?" the pleasant girl asked. Her gentle demeanor replicated in her footsteps, so light I barely heard her flit about the room. Not one strand of her nearly black hair fell out of place the entire time she'd been tending to me, nor did her pale complexion rosy from her efforts. A perfect picture of poise.

Is that all? What else could I possibly need?

I wouldn't keep this woman longer than necessary. After all, I knew what it meant to be forced to serve others. "I-thank you, I-No, no. I mean, yes." I shook my head, maybe trying to shake loose the appropriate response. "Yes, of course that is all. I so very much appreciate all you've done. This bath is wonderful. I didn't mean to keep you." So strange to hear a string of formalities fall off my tongue.

Her head tilted slightly to the side, and an amused smile tightened her lips. "You didn't keep me, Miss. The prince has assigned me to be your maid."

Whatever support my spine had been offering failed. I slipped into the water, catching myself only after my nose submerged. My eyes pinched embarrassingly tight as I tried to scramble back up. Violent splashes from the disturbed water hit the floor. My foot extended pointedly in the air before I slammed it back down, creating more waves as my hands clutched the lipped edge of the tub.

Once stabilized, I wiped away the excess water and bubbles from my face.

"Are you alright, Miss?" she asked, her eyes searching for the invisible cause of my turmoil.

Heat seared my cheeks, probably rivaling the brightness of my hair. The sentiment rocked me so thoroughly, my body had reacted as if it had taken a hit. A personal maid? I had been at the mercy of strangers providing me food, laundering my clothing, supplying my monthly feminine products. Hard to do chores from behind locked doors. But a royal maid, meant to perform a request when I asked, was a wholly new concept.

"Y-yes. Sorry, I just..." Unlike before, my mind became a blank canvas, untouched by strokes of thought or comprehension for what was happening to me. My circumstances were night and day from just days ago.

"Would you like some privacy, Miss?"

Was I allowed to be left unattended? To test that theory, I nodded.

She dipped a pleasant curtsy, and her mouse-like steps carried her away. The door shut, empty silence resounding off the walls, filling my eardrums with thundering quiet.

Alone. In a castle. Granted a suite. Provided a maid.

Four days ago, I'd sat shackled in a shoe box size room with no space to move under lock and key. Now, my skin slid along one of the most luxurious tubs in existence, eclipsed by mountains of fragrant suds in the middle of a private bathing room with high reaching ceilings. Crown molding curved perfectly around every tall, rounded top stained glass window. The sun filtered through the array of colored glass, allowing me to see every detail of glowing decadence. Sophisticated sconces set between them flickered with candlelight.

A girl could get used to—no, safety was still far from reach. Now was not the time to let my guard down. I knew how to play my role, but the rules of the game were changing.

I would see the prince at the dinner he was throwing in my honor—or rather, his own honor, over the magnificent triumph of capturing of The Coveted. From my position, all I could see was the mistake in doing so. Announcing my presence would be a beacon for anyone else sharing the same interests. Though, perhaps from a political perspective, it was clever.

After all, what opponent would dare come against a prince who possessed The Coveted? A sure sign that the gods would be

on his side. If an enemy dared to come against him, and his desire was to defeat his foes, supposedly, The Coveted could make that happen. A battle against magic would be a dangerous play, all for the red-headed girl no one really knew. Part of me braced for that inevitability. How else would the gods play me as a joke? They were running out of options, and seemed to revel in my misery. If they didn't, surely they would have freed me long ago. Still, they were my only refuge.

So many lives at stake. Perhaps it'd be best if I did fail the prince and he did away with me. At least I wouldn't have innocent souls on my conscience.

Lost in thought, I couldn't be sure how much time had passed. The whirls of steam and the mountain of bubbles receded, the sun now hitting a different section of stained glass, sending the cascade of colors spreading across the marble.

"Miss?" The delicate voice from behind made me jerk in the water, but luckily the display was far less extreme this time.

"Apologies. I didn't mean to startle you. How should you like me to do your hair? If it needs to be washed, I should do it now so that it is ready for dinner." Her voice was as sweet as a summer fruit.

"Oh, I..." How does one even dress for a dinner in front of a kingdom as the guest of honor?

Giving my name to the prince marked the first change in my tactics. This would mark the second. "What is your name?" I considered for a moment that I'd never once asked that question in my life.

"Adalene, Miss." She broached the tub, making her way over to the vanity in front of one of the large oval mirrors that reflected the colored windows.

"Adalene."

She spun around, holding a brush and a water pitcher.

If I were to delay the inevitable for as long as humanly possible, I would need an accomplice. "Adalene, can I be honest with you?"

She raced to set down the items she'd just picked up, showering me with her full attention. "Of course, Miss."

"I have never attended such a soiree before. I'm afraid I do not know what is appropriate and what is not. You asked me if I would like help, but I am so overwhelmed, I don't even know what to ask for." Too much depended on this dinner for me to try and tackle it alone, especially since I'd never been taught anything regarding proper formality.

She regarded me tenderly, dropping all tension in her shoulders. "You are in good hands, Miss. May I recommend not wetting your hair further? I suspect we have much to do to prep you, and it looks clean, so that is a step we can skip."

My spirits brightened. It must have been evident on my face as she smiled and grabbed a towel.

"Are you ready to get out, Miss?" she asked, prepared to give me privacy in her company behind the cotton.

Truthfully, no. Leaving this tub meant things would progress here. I didn't know how much time I had, and wondered how long I could get away with concealing myself in this bath chamber.

But evening approached, no matter how much I longed to resist it. Might as well prepare so I didn't start things off on the wrong foot. It was already a mercy that the prince tolerated my reserved demeanor earlier in front of an audience, but testing those boundaries seemed a dangerous move.

I stood, the sounds of jostling water saturating the room. My quiet reprieve had ended, and it was time to get to work. She held the towel taut with her arms outstretched.

Thank the gods I have Adalene's help.

We wrapped my torso in the softest cotton I'd ever felt.

"Very well, Miss. I will ask you to have a seat so I may begin brushing out your hair. Is that alright?"

Nodding, I sat myself down on the stool she'd pulled from beneath the countertop, still clutching the towel around my front. Her dainty fingers collected my tucked hair, letting it cascade down my back. She grabbed the thick, boar-bristled brush and gently worked through the wet ends first.

"I must say, it is very exciting having you in our midst. You are the talk of the kingdom, and we are all very happy to have you here." Her smile was one I easily recognized, someone enchanted by the possibilities of my blessing.

Forcing my smile was difficult. I supposed through her eyes, this would be a happy occasion. No part of me wanted to squander the light that danced behind her brown eyes, so I would act grateful to be here and not let my apprehension show.

"Have you attended *any* formal dinners before?" Adalene asked.

I shook my head. "Not one." Revealing anything about myself made me nervous, but I needed all her help.

"Well, I think the biggest and most noticeable thing to be mindful of is following the lead." She raked her fingers through my hair, gathering it into sections.

"The lead?" I furrowed my brow in question.

"This is the prince's castle. It is his home, his furniture, his food. He is the one who dictates how we use it, and we express our gratitude by following his lead. When he arrives, you stand to greet him, for he is standing."

"When he sits at the table, *you* sit at the table. When he raises a cup to make a toast, you raise your cup and hold it until he finishes. When the food is set before you, it is customary for the prince to take the first bite."

"Once he does, you'll notice everyone else begin, and you may too. Prince Nicholas is a well respected ruler, he won't order your execution if you use the wrong fork." She giggled to herself while her fingers worked the sections of my hair.

My gut churned at the confirmation that the prince does indeed order executions. I tried shaking that away.

“There is more than one fork?” I asked.

She paused the strands mid-weave, catching my eye in the mirror. She laughed, a little more boisterously than her last.

“We will go over the forks once I finish plaiting your hair.” Her warm encouragement soothed my building nerves. She wouldn’t know it, but she was saving my life. Each interaction with the prince required expert navigation, or I’d find myself with a rope necklace.

I watched as she effortlessly crossed and gathered my wavy locks until they were pristinely pulled back. She clenched pins between her teeth, pulling them at random, it seemed, before making them disappear into a design I couldn’t see. Adalene wasn’t my captor, more like a teammate. I’d never had someone like that before.

“You have a lovely name, by the way,” she said.

My chest tightened. I didn’t recall telling her.

Dizzying realization hit that since the prince now knew it, everyone else would, too. An uncomfortable lump formed in the back of my throat, and I tried to clear it.

She paused, bringing her attention back to me in the mirror. Removing the pins from her teeth, a look of contemplation skated across her features. “You know, I’d never heard of The Coveted’s name before today.”

Not surprising.

With a reputation like mine, deemed more of a treasure or an object to own rather than a person to know, people rarely considered I’d even possessed a name. That reminder stole a bit of my enthusiasm.

How many people were going to be attending this dinner? Just the prince? I started to imagine the probing questions that might be tossed my way. How should I answer?

This meal became more daunting, and I wondered how I’d make it through without damning myself.




Mira




Adalene swept her hands down the excess fabric that flowed from my bodice to the floor. The light blue color billowed in tufts, soft pink lace peeking through. My chest had never been bound so tightly, and I found myself constantly practicing deep breaths to test that I was still able to.

Strained, but manageable.

Adalene assured me it was proper, though the rounded bulge of my squished breasts certainly didn't make me feel aligned with proper.

"Is there any way to cover myself more?" Standing in front of my reflection, I could see every curve on my body, and the added ones from deliberately placed tailoring. If I'd struggled with being so thoroughly seen before, this brought it to another level.

"Miss, you look absolutely stunning," Adalene assured, clutching her hands at her chest as she admired me. My fingers itched to claw the ribbons and facets from my body.

"I wish I could wear my cloak," I admitted in a whisper.

Adalene walked up to me, resting her hands on my hips while I stood on the raised pedestal in front of the full-length mirror. "That would be a tragedy. You are so revered in this kingdom. Even the sight of you will give others hope. Plus, you are absolutely gorgeous, like an angel sent among us." Her cheeks pinched with adoration. "I think it's time we head to the dining hall. Are you ready?" Her hands fluffed the flowing fabric.

"As I'll ever be, I guess. Salad, dinner, dessert up top," I repeated the fork order she'd briefly schooled me on.

"You'll do well," she encouraged, offering me a hand as I stepped off the pedestal.

"These skirts are awfully heavy." I braced my palm over my abdomen, feeling the weight dragging behind me.

"They take some getting used to."

Her work uniform looked less constricting, something I'd much rather be wearing. "You're lucky you don't have to get used to it."

She huffed a laugh. "If I could trade in not being on my feet all day just to lug around a heavy dress walking to and from wherever I'd like to spend my time, I'd gladly bear it." She winked.

Horror dug its nails into me, latching on with a biting grip. I'd just complained to a woman who knew all too well what being in servitude felt like, and I'd called her *lucky*. "I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to be insensitive. I never should have said that."

"Oh, it's no bother. There's not one station in life that doesn't require some sort of sacrifice or unpleasant effort. If that was my life, maybe it'd be because I was married to an old Lord with no teeth who wished to bed me every night." Her face pinched. Then she looked at me with a smile and gave a shrug of her shoulder. "Positives and negatives."

I nearly laughed as the door opened into the hallway. My escort of six guards stood ready to surround my walk to dinner. Adalene joined, reminding me how to hold my posture as we moved through the halls. She helped stoke a renewed sense of stability in my situation. I had a job to do and a role to play, something I was used to, and the parts that were foreign to me, she would help me with.

Remembering another portion of Adalene's training, my shoulders sat high, rolled back unnaturally far. But in between holding my chin level and glancing over at her, she silently confirmed my execution. Eventually we stood in front of looming double doors that opened into a black and white checkered tile room dressed for a banquet.

An assortment of long tables bordered the perimeter, guardsmen dressed in shiny armor evenly spread out along the walls. Everyone rose from their seats when they saw me, and the prince stood in near reverence, hands crossed in front of him while his dark blue robe poured over his shoulders to the floor.

For a moment, no one moved. I expected my guards to begin our pace, but we merely froze.

“It’s your grand entrance. Shoulders back, and don’t forget to bow,” Adalene whispered.

My lungs clamped down, refusing to release my breath.

Exposed, I was too exposed.

An uncomfortable heat brewed in my stomach, and I wished even more to tear off this heavy bodice and bolt.

“Mira,” Adalene whispered from the corner of her mouth in a more demanding tone.

Throats cleared, and glances passed between the guests. The Coveted’s debut was here. I’d have to push through the uncomfortable change in order to survive it. My cemented feet finally moved, and each step across the black and white tiles took a lot of mental work.

Shoulders back, chin up. Hands cupped in front, breathe. Take a step. Slow down, steady pace.

Whispers swirled around me, but I tried staying focused. The dark celled room in Clint’s cabin seemed preferable to the scrutiny of the kingdom’s elite.

Prince Nicholas motioned at a guardsman nearby, who swiftly followed the silent instruction. His armor clanked with each step as he came up beside me, offering the crook of his arm.

No turning back now. I took it, letting the solid metal hold me steady since the heat from all the gazes and this blasted bodice started to overtake me. He paraded us around the table, and the prince angled to face me as I approached.

“Thank you for joining me this evening. You look lovely. Please, sit.” He pulled out the high-back chair with deep-blue upholstery beside his, adjusting it so I could slip in front.

I did as he asked and sat, but immediately regretted it when no one else in the room sat down—the prince included. My face heated, and a bead of sweat trailed down the back of my neck. These constricting, heavy clothes trapped heat *and* embarrassment. The thought of outwardly disrespecting the prince in front of an audience, and the possible repercussions that came with it, twisted my gut. I craned my neck to look up at the dazzling royal beside me, his golden locks near glimmering through the setting evening sun.

He addressed the room that’d turned silent as stone. “Welcome everyone to this historical dinner. We are honored to be in the presence of Highcrest’s Coveted. Tonight, we celebrate. There are no foes at our gates, no obstacle we cannot overcome, and the best wine this side of the world.” He held his arms out wide, and the room erupted in cheers. Hands banged on tables in thunderous booms, rattling the silverware.

The prince lowered his palms, and the room quieted in response. “Now, let us eat, drink, and be merry!”

Applause rang out again, and as the prince sat in his chair, so did the rest of the guests.

A tucked away orchestra I hadn’t spotted before began an enchanting melody, and servants dressed in the kingdom’s blue came out like bees from a hive, setting down platters of food along the tables.

Succulent filets of roast, with sides of seasoned green beans and fluffy whipped potatoes presented beautifully, took up my plate.

I examined the forks to the left. There was no salad in sight, so I bypassed the outermost one, picking up the next. From the corner of my eye, I confirmed others grabbed the same.

Maybe I can do this.

I sat a little straighter in my seat, feeling my confidence build. Chatter echoed off the walls as finely dressed men and women began eating. I couldn’t help but stare, watching for shifty eyes landing in my direction.

“Is it satisfactory?”

I snapped my attention to the prince. His eyes fell on my untouched plate.

I placed a forkful of the cloud-like mashed potatoes into my mouth, wanting to avoid showing further insult, and immediately melted. The richness of the salted butter and garlic battered my taste buds. I couldn’t contain the low sound that slowly escaped me. Turned out I could slouch a fair amount in this bodice.

“It seems so,” the prince lightly teased, keeping his smiling face directed down at his own plate.

His assessment pulled me from my euphoria. The profile of his jaw was strong and chiseled, and the collar of his formal jacket reached his freshly shaven jawline. His hair sat perfectly coiffed under the shiny silver crown embedded with blue-colored jewels. He looked around the room while trying to act as if his smile didn’t still linger.

The prince reached for his chalice, and I raced into action. I abruptly set my fork down and did the same, picking mine up, allowing it to hover over its spot.

The prince took a sip, then set the cup down. I followed his lead, replaying Adalene’s instruction. “*When he raises a cup... you raise your cup and hold it until he finishes.*”

“How has your time in Highcrest castle been thus far?” He kept his voice low enough that I knew he spoke only to me.

If I wanted to be more honest, I’d say, overwhelming. Like a dream, but daunting and foreboding. The fact that I was holding frequent conversations today already marked this day as monumental. I felt like a baby deer using her legs for the first time. “Lovely.”

“I’m pleased to hear that. You are a guest in my castle, but please make yourself at home.”

Music played off the walls and high-ceiling. People sat together, laughing, debating, sampling the magnificent foods passed

around by the servers. The myriad of guards continually reminded me of the protection that now surrounded me. Would I be protected though, come a few days? Weeks? Months?

The question must have been written across my face, for the prince asked, "Have I offended you, Miss?"

My head swiveled to face the prince, fork still hanging from my mouth. His eyes flitted to it, concern creasing his forehead. I quickly removed it, prying off the succulent piece of meat and storing it in my cheek. "No. I apologize for my lack of grace." *Don't be difficult.*

My gaze lowered between us, excruciatingly aware of the bulge that sat in my cheek.

"Your grace is not required here." His gentle words extended to me, offering a lifeline. I didn't have time to digest his statement before he reached for his chalice. I hastily reached for mine.

He brought it to his lips, but hesitated, speaking over the rim before resting the cup on his cheek. "If there's anything you need from me, anything at all, please don't hesitate to ask."

With my arm extended, my cup hovered above the table. "Books," I blurted without a second thought.

"Books?" He cocked an eyebrow, fighting a smile as he set his chalice back down.

I lowered mine, arm retreating into my lap.

"Yes, I quite enjoy fictional stories or books on poetry." When I'd glanced at the books in my room earlier, they were philosophy or educational text. While I had nothing against strengthening my mind, I didn't want to spend my final days or weeks focusing on reality. I wanted to sink away into a fairytale, or imagine what it may be like to have an adventure.

"Consider it done." The prince waved over one of his men, then leaned in to whisper the communication. He pulled back, centering himself in his seat once more. "They shall be brought to your quarters this very evening."

Fireworks lit up behind my eyes, a true reason to celebrate. The last time I'd read had been with the pastor and his wife. Of course, all of their books related to the history of the church, not my preferred choice of subject.

The prince reached for his chalice, and I went to follow suit.

"Please, if you don't intend on actually taking a drink, Miss, allow your arm some rest." The prince smirked to one side when I caught his eyes on my outstretched hand.

"Oh. I was told to always follow your lead." Still unsure which course of action to take, my hand hesitated mid-launch.

"If I ever require you to follow my lead, I will surely inform you." He winked, then took a sip. The man beside me held the weight of a kingdom on his shoulders, yet the way he conversed would never have me suspecting such a thing. He didn't seem to hold any tension in the way he interacted with me, which most captors did. They all held a look in their eye that made me uneasy, even Clint. Desperation, most likely. But not the prince.

I debated for a moment on how to proceed. I would do well to drink something during this meal, so I continued my reach. Holding the chalice by the stem, I took a sip of the dark red wine. A zing of smoky fruit danced on my taste buds. I'd had wine before, but this was undoubtedly of much higher quality. The unladylike gurgle that followed forced a dribble down my chin until my head tipped all the way back and I emptied my cup.

I used the back of my hand to wipe away the droplet and set the empty cup down in front of me.

"Now that's how you enjoy a celebration." The prince tipped his chalice toward me, then downed his own.

An ease crashed over me like an ocean wave, and I giggled, feeling a flush spread across my cheeks. Though this time, it wasn't from the ambush of attentive eyes, but from a carefree blooming inside. Speaking of which, as I glanced around the grand room filled with an excessive amount of people, I caught some of their eyes hooked on me.

A few mumbled to their neighbors who exchanged demure laughter and tossed gazes my way. Others speared me with that greedy look I'd come to know well. I squirmed in my seat, casting a quick glance at the host of guardsmen, convincing myself that no one stood a chance of stealing me out from under a prince.

Another few sips of my swiftly refilled wine had my worries slipping further from my grasp. I spotted Adalene from the corner of my eye amidst the fray of servers. She attended to the guests at the furthest end of the room.

I didn't know she'd be on duty for dinner. She kept her professional focus as she flitted effortlessly about, as I'd come to expect from her in the drastically short time we'd interacted. Though I did note her continual slipping gaze toward a nearby guard.

It was subtle. I couldn't even be sure the guard saw it. He had jet black, perfectly coiled hair, and the silver of his armor radiated against his umber skin. I made a mental note to ask her about it later as the tips of my fingers became slightly numb.

The band switched their tempo to something faster, and guests left their seats to enter the empty space in the middle of the room.

"Now this is a show worth watching," the prince said to me.

A formal dance began, a line of ladies aligning on the left, and a line of gentlemen on the right. They crossed paths, only to retreat, and continue the move again. This time, they spun around each other in the middle. Dresses shuffled, and tailcoats twirled, everyone knowing exactly where to move and when.

Synchronized. Calculated. Beautiful. Adoration and jealousy fought in my stomach. Maybe not so much jealousy as a desperate longing. A longing to belong.

With every wistful step, I was reminded how my life never allowed me to experience anything like this. Freedom to move.

The dancing continued, becoming less rehearsed as the evening went on.

My fingertips battled their numbing feeling as I clutched the fork to continue eating. Someone always replenished my wine every time I drained it, and the more I had, the more it seemed a good idea to continue.

“Do you hate magic wielders?” I blurted out of nowhere. It was a question I had wondered, but would never have dared to ask. For some reason, now seemed like the perfect time.

“If I did, would I have invited you here?” He had a charming smile, but I think he knew that.

“Well, I’m an exception.” Another sip of wine sounded good, but when I raised the chalice, it was empty. I frowned.

“Miss Mira, I can assure you, I harbor no ill will toward those with magic.”

“I’ve heard there is magic in your castle.” I flagged down a server and pointed at my cup.

The prince adjusted in his seat, angling to face me. He spoke softer as he asked, “May I ask what have you heard?”

I picked up a long green bean, forgoing the fork entirely, and bit the end. “Just that. I was hoping to speak with them. I didn’t know anyone else with magic would be here. What position do they hold?”

Prince Nicholas’ shoulders dropped a slight amount. “Oh, you are speaking about our transference caster. Her name is Nila, she has been under crown employ for close to a decade now. I would be happy to arrange a meeting. May I ask how you heard about her?”

Transference caster. I didn’t know what that meant. Education on magic was non-existent, and I’d learned not to trust rumors too heavily. But meeting her would help answer my questions and better settle into my new role here. I licked the melted butter off my fingers. “Your guardsmen were talking about it. I overheard.”

I wanted to ask him why he ordered his men to kill Clint, but something in my mind warned against it. Clearly, he wanted my magic at all costs.

The prince didn’t respond as he took a sip of his wine, though I noticed his eyes scanning the room above the rim.

Eventually, the room turned into a haze of candlelight, and my limbs hung heavy. I’d expected the prince to probe about my blessing over the course of the meal, but I didn’t seem to hold his particular interest. Guests continually approached his table, briefly conversing over this and that. Any other day I might have paid more attention, hoping to learn something of value. Yet, I found myself hardly caring as I struggled to hang on to the beat of the music.

I don’t think I can feel my nose. Can I ever feel my nose?

Adalene came through the crowd of bodies, and I caught sight of the prince beckoning her. She rounded the table and came up behind us.

“Adalene!” I raised my arms in the air, happy to see my friend—or, closest thing to a friend. My body swayed gently from side to side to a rhythm of its own.

“I fear Miss Mira may not last much longer,” the prince said to Adalene.

I squeezed the features on my face, unsure what that meant. Was it threatening? Did I care? My blinks seemed to take longer to open.

“Please, take the guard and escort our esteemed guest to her quarters. Retrieve anything she needs,” the prince whispered.

“Yes, your majesty.” Adalene curtsied.

“Yes, your majesty.” I mocked and saluted, my furrowed brow hanging heavy and my bottom lip pouting. Then I sank into myself, smiling up at her. Her face held less amusement as her eyes widened and shifted to the prince.

Prince Nicholas simply smiled. “Thank you for joining me, Miss Mira. I’m afraid I must bid you a good evening.” He pushed his seat back and bowed toward me before taking his leave toward a small, round bellied man with spectacles.

“Someone enjoyed the kingdom’s wine, huh?” Adalene teased as she wrapped an arm around my back to lift me from my seat.

“Oh, it was delicious! Did you try some?! Maybe not as much as I did. Oh no, did I finish it all? I’m sorry I didn’t share.” My sorrowful wails grew louder as my clumsy steps stomped forward.

Adalene laughed beside me. My body depended on her support more than I realized. I couldn’t correct the tilt in my vision. Had the floor always been slanted?

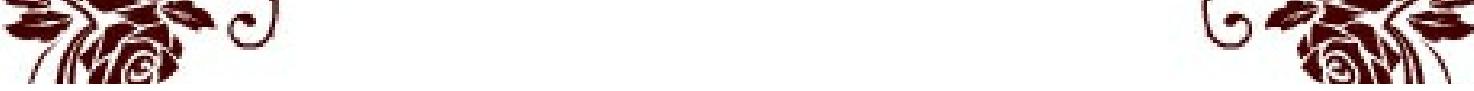
“I will have some later, don’t you worry. I can’t let you have all the fun, now can I?”

I laughed, the sound still something foreign, but not one part of me cared. Then a hiccup worked its way up my chest, but seemed to lodge there. I scrunched my face at the tightness building in my throat.

“Hey, hey, try and keep it down until we get into your room, alright?” Adalene continued prodding us along the hall, and the guards picked up their positions, forming a human shield.

“Oh, I won’t be sick. I feel too good to be sick.” Another hiccup fought its way out.

“We’ll see.” She snickered.



Mira



I wondered if the ceiling had fallen on my head in the night. The pressure in my skull continued to be immense while I ate a delicious breakfast and battled to keep it down while Adalene squeezed me into today's dress. Thankfully, corset boning kept me upright as we strode through the halls.

Adalene's arm in the crook of mine also offered comforting stability, which reminded me over and over that I would never touch that wine again. Laying in the middle of this hallway sounded too enticing. Since she was there to guide me, the six guards trailed a few feet behind, giving us a little space.

Adalene shared some castle history, referencing paintings on the walls, artifacts on the tables, and the wings of the building. I paid attention—to the extent the dull throb behind my temples would allow. A life of dingy closets, sheds, and rooms holding as much comfort as a cell never allowed me to desire anything more. Yet, here I was, experiencing more luxury than most would ever see, beholding priceless antiques riddled with significance.

“And after Prince Nicholas's great grandmother Nicholina came back from—” Adalene silenced herself.

Confused, I peered at her and trailed to where her attention drifted. She'd spotted a guard at a post. A hazy memory returned of her exchanging smiles and stolen glances during last night's dinner with the soldier in view.

He barely shifted on his feet, but his subtle glance in our direction didn't go unnoticed. My stare swapped between the both of them as our strides brought us all aligned with one another.

Adalene tilted her head with the most graceful, fluid sway, and the smile she plastered on remained when she looked forward again. Curiosity made me glance over my shoulder, and it was his eyeline I caught this time. He eyed the back of her as we walked by. When he saw that I'd clocked it, he stiffened and returned to his stoic, rigid pose.

I gazed ahead. “He seems interested,” I dared to say.

“What?” Adalene overplayed her shocked answer, and it was apparent to both of us that she understood.

I softly nudged her shoulder with mine, a knowing smirk on my lips.

The encounter flooded my heart with giddy energy. Besides the relationships of my captors, I'd only ever been able to witness them from a distance. Couples rubbing noses in the market, secret glances and smirks between vendors, and of course, the occasional rain of men's clothing from second story windows while they groveled from the street to the scorned woman above.

Some were more obvious about their relationships than others, but while the busyness of the crowd drowned out hidden interactions, I'd look for them.

Never being close enough to actually learn their situations, my imagination would make up stories. Vendors stealing glances may have grown up in competing family businesses, fueling a forbidden romance between rivals. The clothes being tossed could have been over the husband losing their savings to pay his gambling debts. Whatever I'd conjure, it would always be a mystery of the truth. Rare instances where I could read a romance story only fueled my imagination when I spotted things in real life.

But to be this close to an exchange, close enough to find out details? I wanted to jump out of my skin. It was thrilling. My mind raced, longing for information, stirring up the fluttering in my stomach that thankfully didn't threaten to spill onto the carpet anymore. “You like him?”

Judging by Adalene's stiff demeanor, I feared I may not get any answers.

“He wouldn't be interested in me. Besides, Matron Magda scolds us young girls for getting *distracted from our duties*.”

“Who's that?”

“She's the one who trains us for our positions within the castle. Her number one rule is *don't become distracted, and don't distract others from their duties*. *The kingdom requires your focus, not your forlorn whims*.” She spit out the rule in an imitation I could only assume was spot on. I could basically see Magda in my mind's eye with a voice like that, someone stern

and proper. Extremely poised, with not a hair out of place on her head and deep set wrinkles from a life of grimacing.

“But once you become familiar with your posting, you learn everyone else’s around you as well. Knowing what time and where they’ll be. There’s a room where we can hide away on our breaks so that we’re not seen slacking. That guard, his name is Archeron.” She fought the smile curving her lips.

“How long have you known him?”

“He’s been a guard for two years, but our shifts started overlapping a couple months ago.”

My heart swelled. For once, I didn’t need to invent the storyline in my head.

“We’ve only chatted a couple times. I get a bit shy around him, but he’s very nice. Kind. Thoughtful. One day, he overheard me complaining about working with the garden’s roses. The gardeners shear fresh flowers when they’re in bloom, and then we prepare them for vases and centerpieces. But I was getting fed up with those thorns pricking me.”

“The next day, I’d had gardening gloves placed outside my sleeping chambers. I’d only complained to one other maid, and only he and another guard were in the room at the time that I had. I’ve never spoken to the other, so it must have been him. But I’m too afraid to say anything, because what if it wasn’t, and he thinks it’s weird that I assumed he did?”

Her grip tensed around my arm. I could tell this wasn’t the first time she’d thought through this line of questioning.

“But maybe now that you’re here, your magic will spread throughout the castle and make him fall in love with me.” Hope creased her eyes, and they sparkled with anticipation.

I forced a smile as my stomach dropped to the floor, reminded of our destination and what awaited me there.

“The sun doesn’t need the moon to tell it how much it shines.” I regurgitated one of the lines tucked away in my memory. I couldn’t force anyone to be with her, but quotes like this allowed my true magic to root and grow.

Adalene cocked her head back, giving me a scrupulous expression. The question sat just behind her lips, but we approached a row of arched openings that looked toward the snow-covered courtyard beyond.

“Brr!” Adalene released her hold on me and tightened her cloak around herself.

Mine rested heavily over my shoulders, and I’d worked up a sweat marching through the halls with it on. Crisp winter air nipped at my cheek—a welcomed balm. Guards lined the perimeter, and the prince came into view, already waiting in the snow-laden gardens.

“I’ll retrieve your gown from the seamstress and meet you in your bedchambers later.” Adalene smiled, curtsied, then resumed down one of the corridors.

I remained facing her direction even after she’d gone out of sight, nervous to navigate this on my own. My bottom lip sandwiched between my teeth. A guard cleared his throat, attempting to break my self-inflicted trance. When I still couldn’t bring myself to move, one of them spoke.

“The prince is waiting, Miss.”

Precisely why I’d stalled. Snippets from the night returned in fragments, and I recalled asking the prince about the other magic wielder at the castle. Had I told him why? The rest of the conversation was hazy. Had I revealed anything about my magic? I worried that was the reason he’d called a meeting so quickly. Navigating this new role was proving more difficult than I’d hoped.

Huffing out a warm breath that clouded in front of my face, I forced my feet to move. Snow crunched beneath my steps, creating my own prints in the fresh dusting over the worn path. Guards’ armor clanked behind me, alerting the prince of our proximity.

He turned, his dark blue robe swirling along the ground as he did.

He opened his arms wide, gesturing to the space. “Welcome to the castle courtyard. Thank you for accepting my invitation.”

Did I have a choice?

“We shall take a short walk around the grounds. I won’t dare keep you too long, as I’m sure the warmth of the hearth is much more preferable to freezing in my company.” A genuine smile graced his face. “Sometimes I just need to leave the confines of these walls and take in the fresh air.”

Reverting back to my safeguards, I merely dipped my head. Part of me wanted to flee or faint, not knowing how much I’d let slip last night because of that infernal wine.

“Was the dinner to your liking?” he asked as I approached, falling into step at my side.

A guard cleared his throat, but the prince waved off his interruption.

“The dinner was wonderful, Your Majesty.” Simple. Polite.

His small laugh resonated beside me. I glanced to see what caused it.

The prince held an amused grin. “I’m not a Majesty. Yet.”

A rush of heat scorched my cheeks, contrasting the chill in the air. Adalene’s list of proper titles probably told me to avoid using “majesty” but I’d forgotten.

“But please, you needn’t bother with formal titles. Call me Nicholas.”

I had no idea how to react. Would I dare drop his title?

“For as much as I know about The Coveted, I feel as though I know very little. I’m hoping you will enlighten me.”

A little sigh rushed from my fraught lungs. Alright, at least I knew I hadn't revealed much.

We walked stride for stride, matching a leisurely pace. The courtyard opened up to the wide expanse of gardens. I imagined how beautiful they would look when in bloom, without the repressive cloak of winter.

A knot formed in my throat, trained to keep my responses from leaving my mouth. I had no choice but to fight it. "What would you like to know?" What *was* there to know other than my life had never been my own?

His smile was warm enough to melt the snow. "How about...where you were born?"

"In Huntings," I replied. The irony of the village name I'd been born in, and what my life had become, didn't evade me.

"Ah, that's quite the small village. Did you grow up there?"

Vivid flashbacks played in my mind. Beautiful, heartwarming memories—until they weren't. I shook my head, attempting to silence the recall. "Uh, not for very long. I've moved around a lot." *Putting it lightly.*

"I'm a bit envious of you. I've only ever known these walls. Not that I'm complaining. I know how fortunate my circumstance is."

I bit down on the bitter scoff that wanted to escape. *Envious of me.* "Very fortunate, indeed."

This man had been born with a golden pacifier in his mouth, completely unaware of the dark realities the world could offer. What it could take.

Try looking beyond what the world presents to you.

The witch's words echoed in my mind as subtle as a whisper on the wind. Perhaps this is what she'd meant. I'd been conditioned to think the prince was evil, but he'd been nothing but kind and courteous to me thus far, and didn't possess that terrifying twinkle in his eye when he gazed upon me.

I took a moment to consider, but the overwhelming curiosity won out. I fought against every ingrained instinct, pushed past each memory that assured me I should stick with my perfected tactics. If I left this garden still unsure what purpose he had for me, the threat would eat away at my very soul.

"May I ask you a question?" I asked, the boldness making my skin itch beneath the surface.

"By all means." He gestured with a gloved open palm.

I steeled my resolve and asked, "You are a prince. All the wealth and means at your disposal. What need do you have of me?"

He craned his face toward the gray painted sky. Whirls of steam billowed from his nostrils as he contemplated and prepared to answer my question. My lungs turned to stone, my stomach plummeting to the earth. After this, I would know. No more purgatory.

His gaze shifted around us, briefly falling upon the soldiers that lined the gardens. "Miss Mira, I wish for nothing more than for you to simply *be* here. Whatever prosperity you bring will certainly bless the entirety of Highcrest."

I raised an eyebrow.

"Unless I'm keeping you from someplace else. Do you need to return somewhere? I suppose I should have asked. I'd heard about your rescue, the place he'd kept you." He worked down the notch in his throat. "The cell door." He shook his head, as if simply hearing the report let him catch a glimpse of the poor conditions that usually made up my life.

Listening to him voice the atrocity of it all cracked a door in my mind, one that held back the overwhelming sadness I'd fought to contain. Fought to pretend a withered chunk of my soul wasn't trapped behind it. I slammed that mental door shut, not willing to expose it to the world.

"No, I don't." I didn't belong anywhere. There was no person or place who waited for me, besides those lurking in the shadows, hunting my supposed power.

"Then I would like to have you here indefinitely. Who better to benefit from your blessing than all the people of Highcrest?"

Before now, it had only been a thought. One of many regarding how my future here would unfold. To hear it from his lips, though, tugged on a part of my spirit that longed for touch.

The weight of my dragging cape disappeared, along with the dread that'd fused to my very bones. I could stay here. Live in this castle, *indefinitely*. Even knowing that I must look foolish bearing this toothy smile, I couldn't hide it.

Permanence. Stability. Things I'd dreamed of since Clint's offer in the woods. Though, now of course I lacked the privacy and anonymity, this was potentially even better. Guarded. Safe.

"I'm happy to see you find that offer acceptable." His charming grin could have been mistaken for the clouds parting to make way for the radiant sun. I never would have anticipated a prince to have such a kind heart.

Those whispers of inevitability tried overriding my thoughts, but I forced them back. I didn't want to think about what could go wrong. About the strength of the prince's enemies—or even his allies, should they turn on him. No, I wanted to think about what it would feel like to have a home. To not be continually sought after to grant wishes like some sort of genie. Me. Here. With friends like Adalene, and maybe Miles if I saw him around.

We continued our stroll. A prince and his welcomed guest.

"I wish for you to make an appearance this afternoon, when the townspeople come to report. Who knows the boundlessness of your magic. Maybe it'll touch the countless souls who present themselves before you today."

There it was—the catch. He wanted me on display. Why would I have let myself, even for a brief moment, have hope that I could be normal and safe behind these walls? The world would always look at me as The Coveted, and never anything more. I cursed myself internally as I battled against the tightness of seething disappointment in my chest.

To show my compliance, as I would always need to, I nodded. That must have been why Adalene went to retrieve a dress for me.

“It will be good for them to see you. The people, I mean. You will give them hope, and that’s a powerful thing.”

Perhaps the prince was right. Maybe, in some way, the influence of my true power *could* actually spread across the kingdom. It was always meant for goodness, and the thought of helping people who didn’t seek to steal my freedom kindled a new fire in me. The dreary sky suddenly seemed brighter.

“Your Highness, your cousin has arrived,” a guard called our attention.

We spun, and the prince’s countenance illuminated. “Ah, cousin! Glad you finally made it.”

Short white hair adorned a youthful face with piercing blue eyes over a tanned complexion. He held an elegant beauty for a man. His garb consisted of deep reds, with a golden sigil of a lion embroidered over his heart, which I assumed represented another kingdom.

“Sorry I’m late, Nicky. This must be the famed *Coveted* girl.” His feline gaze prowled over my countenance, almost making me believe he could see through the perception of my title.

I curtsied, bowing my head—an excuse to break his unrelenting eye contact.

“Marco, this is Miss Mira.”

I winced internally hearing my name exchanged casually; still something to adjust to. When I straightened, Marco gave me the tiniest bow I’d ever seen. I had a feeling that even if he wasn’t taller, he’d still find a way to look down on me.

“Let us hope your magic is as useful as the rumors claim it.” His words dripped with condescension, and by their very nature, an undertone of threat.

Tension returned to my shoulders. I searched his eyes for any hints of intention, but he stared back, holding a cocky smirk. Nothing but scrutiny glared back at me.

My gaze shot to the ground. Challenging him and his overbearing ego wasn’t my intent. I didn’t want to get in the metaphorical ring to square up against this man, not when I now had everything to lose.

“She is a welcomed addition to us, indeed. Miss Mira, this is Prince Marco Horales from the great Kingdom of Duski. He’s traveled a long way from his sunny continent to bless his favorite cousin with a visit.” Prince Nicholas smiled while he wrapped an arm around his cousin, totally oblivious to the newly introduced strain.

Another prince. My thoughts immediately took me to the paintings of war that decorated the castle halls. A war waged between cousins to possess a magic that didn’t exist...

“My apologies, Miss Mira. I’m afraid I’ll have to bid you farewell for now. Best to get you inside, anyway. I’ll look forward to seeing you in a few hours.” He bowed, then raised his arm high, alerting guardsmen to escort me.

“I also look forward to seeing you soon,” Marco said.

I curtsied again.

Marco’s stare lingered a moment too long before he turned on his heel with Prince Nicholas and they walked with each other’s arms over their shoulders, a few guards trailing behind. My assigned squad stepped out of the way, staying back for me.

“Let us escort you back, Miss,” one of the guards said.

I nodded, though I wondered if I’d find it more difficult to breathe inside those walls now.

Refusing to sink into the abyss of dark thoughts, I shook myself free, focusing instead on the present. Once I reached the plateau at the top of the gardens, I could see over the sturdy walls to the land and towns in the distance.

Maybe this was what the gods had in mind all along. Not forgotten, but put on a path where the magic in my veins could actually make a difference to an entire kingdom.



Mira



Curled up on the tiny tufted sofa in my room, I turned another page. The fire crackled and danced in a calming rhythm before me. These pages had browned more than some of the other books recently delivered to my room, fragile and worn with age. My touch was feather-light and delicate as I carried on reading the familiar passages.

It was within these very pages where I'd found the means to survive years ago. I think I had been thirteen when the idea sparked, after one of my captors spent time teaching me about poetry. The artful design of language contained lessons on the importance of words not said as much as on words that were. That lesson had kept me alive.

As much as I resented that witch for blessing me, I resented the hunger of mankind more. The hunger that could drive any person, no matter how nice or good to do unspeakable things. All for a chance at their deepest desires.

My stare had wandered off the paper as a knock at the door made me jolt.

"Come in," I called.

Adalene entered with another following behind her. "The seamstress is here to make sure the fitting is correct."

"Oh." I closed the book and tore the blanket off my lap. I walked toward the dressing stool, nodding graciously at the unfamiliar face.

The seamstress held my gown folded over her arm. The garment looked like it weighed as much as the last dress, and I internally groaned. I knew my muscles weren't used to exerting much effort, but the fact that clothing was almost too heavy made me even more motivated to walk the gardens and build my stamina.

"We do not have much time before the prince has requested your presence. Come." Adalene ushered me with her hands and kind smile.

Currently, I only wore the satin slip that all ladies of fashion wore under their clothes, and I already mourned the loose fit. They made quick work of placing the dress over my raised arms and head until they shimmied it down my body. They tugged the fabric, straightening parts that fought to constrict me.

Once it was on, I stepped onto the round dressing stool in front of the three paneled mirror. The seamstress pulled out a cushion full of pins and placed some between her teeth while shuffling the fabric around.

"Alright, while you two get this sorted, I'll go make sure we're on schedule." Adalene left the room with haste.

Something in the silence with a woman serving me had me uneasy, and to my own surprise, I found myself needing to fill it. "How long have you been a seamstress?"

She met my gaze in the mirror and quickly removed the pins from her mouth. "Oh, I'm actually just an apprentice. I've been blessed by the gods to study under the kingdom's finest." Eyes filled with adoration followed the billowing fabric while she added a few pins, cinching it along the way down.

"I've only been here a few days. This is the first dress I've designed myself within the castle. The head seamstress has been developing pain in her hands and came to my town to find a replacement. Luckily, she stumbled upon me apprenticing at another shop. And now you get to model my newest creation. If I had known the vibrancy of your hair, I wouldn't have picked this shade of yellow, but you are very beautiful and could make any piece shine."

I didn't quite know what to say as she returned to her task. The golden hair on her head shone under the light cascading through the windows, and it revealed more than just her lovely appearance.

A likeness.

Suddenly, the tightness of the corset felt like it would squeeze hot vomit right out of me.

"What did you say your name was?" I didn't really want to know. I already did know. I blinked wearily, waiting for her response.

"Tula, Miss. And I'm honored to be dressing The Coveted. This will surely be a blessing to me and my family."

This must be what drowning feels like.

Forcing a smile, my cheeks faltered, unable to keep it steady. Knowledge remained a heavy burden to bear.

“Here we are!” Adalene waltzed in, huffing, and holding a hand on her waist. “How much longer, Tula?”

I looked at Tula in the reflection. I hadn’t even seen her pull out a needle and thread. She stitched remarkably effortlessly. Clint was right.

“Just another minute or two.”

“Perfect. By the time we get these heels on, you should be finished with that and we can tidy up that hair.” Adalene knelt in front of me, hiking up the dress while she put on my shoes.

The already tight dress was quickly worked to fit tighter. The shoes weighed as much as lead.

“Do they fit okay? Not that you’ll be doing much walking. Mostly just standing, but if they’re not comfortable, I can get you something else.”

“No, no, they’re fine. Thank you.” Nothing would help me feel any better, anyway.

Tula had already started walking away, and when I glanced over my shoulder, all I could do was watch her leave. My heart punched against the cage in my chest. Should I have said something?

“Let’s finish up with your hair so we don’t run late, shall we?” Adalene motioned me to the vanity.

I did as she instructed, but my mind was elsewhere. She ran the golden paddled brush through my hair and started rambling about the guard. To think I’d been so excited about this conversation hours ago, and now I could barely latch onto a care through the fog of guilt that’d swept over me from seeing Tula. Did she know her father had died? That he’d stolen me? Would it break her heart? Would she be mad at him for what he’d done? Mad at me for his demise?

“But he must not have feelings for me, or else he would have said something by now.” She sighed while pinning up a portion of hair in the back.

“That’s not true.” I forced a response so I didn’t flat out ignore her, despite drowning in my own thoughts.

“Oh, she speaks! I thought you’d forgotten how.” Her lopsided grin in the mirror created a smile of my own.

“Sorry.”

She beamed, proud of her teasing jab. “Why do you think that’s not true?”

“Sometimes people battle with things inside themselves. Wars not fought by swords and arrows are just as harmful.” The introspection oozed from my lips, and suddenly the layers of fashionable dress weren’t enough. I felt naked and exposed, like maybe I’d somehow revealed exactly what had been bothering me with Tula.

Adalene pursed her lips, nodding as she continued toying with my vibrant red locks. “But he’s a soldier! He should be better trained.” She winked, and a bit of weight lifted from my chest.

Relief pressed a loving kiss to my whirling thoughts as I took a steady breath. Well, as deeply as I could, considering the restriction around my rib cage in this yellow fabric and ribbon and lace.

“Beautiful as ever.” Adalene rested her palms on my shoulders while admiring her work. She’d pulled half of my hair back, looping it into a bun while letting the rest fall down my back.

“Thank you, Adalene.”

“We should get going. I’m sure the prince will appreciate if we’re early.” She clapped the top of my shoulders, taking a wide berth so I could stand.

“One moment,” I said, fighting the dress with every step as I rushed to my bedside. I slid my hand under my silky pillow, palming the stone that I kept hidden beneath. Luckily, Tula enjoyed sewing pockets into her designs. Not as capable as a hefty sword, the stone provided me with a different kind of protection, one of comfort. As long as I had that, I could think of my family and not feel so alone as I navigated this strange new territory of being put on display before a crowd.

The dress moved and swayed with my steps, performing a dance of its own. Its beauty and craftsmanship was sure to be admired.

I just wished someone else would take the attention.



Whispers began the moment I came into view of the awaiting guests. A long line had formed, preparing to enter the grand hall. Citizens of Highcrest, gathered for whatever purpose the prince had summoned them for. Comparatively, I was far too overdressed. Flutters overwhelmed my stomach, and the tight-fitting gown seemed to tighten further. I couldn’t meet their gaze. My escorting party didn’t stop, and for that I was grateful.

When we reached the grand hall, the doors opened for me. We walked down the navy blue strip that fed into the royal room, the one that had originally been crowded with bystanders during my arrival.

Today, only a desk sat fixed at the end of the runway before the dais. Two soldiers stood on either side, and an elderly man with a quill sat at it with nothing more than papers and an open wooden chest.

Behind him, the prince stood in conversation with someone of high ranking, considering the prestigious uniform and how they held the prince's undivided attention. His arms were crossed in his elegant military style attire as they conversed, and I couldn't help but notice that Prince Nicholas seemed bothered. His fingers supported his chin, his thumb swiping along his mouth while he nodded at whatever the man was saying.

Then Marco fell into my sight. He sat, extremely casually, in one of the throne chairs, leg lazily thrown over the armrest. The vision of a spoiled royal, with a glare that proved everyone else beneath him.

We locked eyes, but I quickly averted my gaze.

"Ah, Miss Mira, radiant as ever. Thank you for joining me today. Please, take a seat," Prince Nicholas called out his welcome when he spotted me, then motioned to the dais.

Guess I would be joining Marco. *Lucky me.*

I realized too late that Adalene had dropped from my side, taking a position near the front doors, next to a few fully armored guardsmen, helmets and all. I assumed she knew exactly who was underneath, and why she stood closer to one than the others.

At least someone will enjoy their time here today.

When I faced forward again, Prince Nicholas stood before me, hand extended.

What has my life become?

I placed my hand in his, and he lifted it as I stepped upon the dais that had three thrones facing the room. He gestured for me to sit in the middle.

"Join me, oh coveted one!" Marco said, slumped in the chair, twisting his wrists enthusiastically at my welcome.

I timidly turned to face the room and lowered myself, sinking into the intimidating seat that essentially swallowed me whole.

"Ever attend one of these things before?" Marco asked, a severe lack of fervor in the question.

I shook my head.

"Prepare for the most boring hours of your life." He released a strained exhale and adjusted in his seat, slumping down even further—if that were possible.

I subtly grazed my hand over that familiar lump in my pocket, silently praying to somehow make it through this day.



How long had passed, I couldn't say for certain. The man at the desk would take a donation from the villagers, write down their information, and then they would step up one by one, voicing their concerns to the prince.

The act was oddly intimate. These people were vulnerable, coming to ask for assistance. Marco hadn't spoken a peep, but occasionally switched up his lounging position. The prince never rushed anyone, or expressed any annoyance, even though we must have heard similar requests nearly one hundred times today.

In some fashion or another, their income had been hindered, and they asked for grace and leniency on their owed taxes. All of them worked in the lower markets. Seemed to be a recurring issue down there that disturbances outside of their control interrupted their livelihoods somehow. Unreliable employees, struggling to sustain crops due to unfavorable weather, late shipments at the docks.

And Prince Nicholas granted their wishes, much to the chagrin of the cherub-faced man collecting the donations.

Every. Single. One.

People expressed gratitude, leaving with an obvious burden lifted off their shoulders, relieved smiles on their faces.

None of the prince's council or guards reacted, even after his continual approval of their requests, which made me believe this sort of behavior was normal for the golden royal.

How could anyone hold hostility toward a prince that treated them with such kindness?

Any who stared at me weren't able to for long, and I appreciate the clipped opportunities. After what must have been several hours, about a dozen people remained. A round-bellied man wearing a too-tight red shirt with a worn, brown leather overcoat approached the dais. He bowed before speaking, as was customary.

"Sir Rowan Crixby, ship captain of The Black Marlin from South Harbor." The man from the desk announced the next visitor.

"Your Highness, I come to you with a humble request, and I bow at your greatness."

This room would be coated in a thick layer of flattery by the end of the day.

"Speak freely, sir," Prince Nicholas encouraged.

"My expected shipments to Your Highnesses upper markets will be delayed. There's some troubles with the equipment on board. Holes in the nets, broken slats in the barrels. But in order to repair those things, I need the payments from the vendors."

"You're asking for me to force your vending partners to pay you for a shipment they won't yet receive?" The prince questioned.

"Ay. Or, maybe coin from your royal treasury could pay the tradesmen for the fixin'."

The cherub-faced man choked on air at the boldness of the suggestion.

"You know the kingdom doesn't provide loans. There are those in your village that deal with that kind of business, and I won't take it from them," the prince said. While he may have been quick to grant relief from owed funds to the crown, it seemed this was an issue he'd stand firm on.

"Ay, yes sir, er-Your Highness, but I may be behind on some payments for them, too. Maybe Your Highness could encourage a donation from the tradesmen? The sooner I can get the nets back in the water, the sooner I can fulfill all of Your Highnesses' needs." Upon his next stumbling bow, the sheen of grease staining his stringy black hair glistened.

"Sir Crixby, you're asking me to force free labor from other hard-working citizens." The prince's stern tone cut the man where he stood. "If you think that I would purposely disadvantage a man so another could profit, you are sorely mistaken." Something akin to anger laced his words. White spots coated his knuckles as they squeezed the arm of his throne.

A chill ran through my blood. I sent up a silent prayer to the gods that I would never be on the receiving end of the prince's scorn.

"Just until I can get the payments from the upper city vendors!" The man plastered on a smile, displaying his crowded brown teeth.

The prince wouldn't budge. "With money which you will *also* need to pay back for the loans currently outstanding? You seem to be leaving a trail of owed debts."

The man's face twisted, his hands nervously wringing his hat. Uncertainty shadowed his features. This exchange wasn't going as well as he'd hoped. He swiped away the long strands of greasy hair from his face, casting glances at some of the prince's men as if they'd step in and assist.

The further the prince probed, the more evident it became that this man held the traits of a swindler. And the way he appeared nervous under the inability to charm the prince made him seem even more so.

"Sir Crixby, the Kingdom does not have the funds to allocate to poor businessmen," Prince Nicholas stated, his anger replaced by cool indifference and dismissal.

I was thankful that the interaction was over. It'd become uncomfortable seeing the man called out for his lies.

"Perhaps you are best asking our beloved Coveted. The gods will have to be the ones to smile down on you today, Sir Crixby."

My cheeks caught aflame. The man's stare shifted to me, that delirious look of desire flaring to life, and my stomach flipped. The room fell deathly silent before whispers erupted from those waiting in line. More covetous gazes cast in my direction.

"This should be interesting. Work your magic, covet girl." Marco taunted with too much amusement. He actually sat up straight in his chair, slamming his feet on the ground and leaning forward in eager anticipation of what would follow—the first time he'd engaged today.

I wanted to freeze, but staying silent wasn't an option.

My mind blanked. I didn't know how to help this man. Especially not with so many eyes on me. If the prince suspected I was a fraud, what would he do with me? After the interaction with this man, I'd seen how he felt about swindlers.

I cleared my throat, reaching into the dusty corners of my mind for memorized passages. I worked down the knot in my tightening throat.

"The wise man sits in a tall tower, spectating over all. He views the workers beneath as fools for they do not understand the complexity of their existence. But the fool is the most wise of all, for he builds the life he wants."

The room remained silent until Marco slumped back in his seat. Somehow, the fact that he didn't say anything taunting made it all the worse.

A stray cough echoed in the back of the room. Confused eyes darted between the prince and me. Beyond swallowing, I didn't dare move. Attempting to keep the horror from my neutral face proved more of a challenge than I would have thought. The entire room could hear my wild heartbeat, I was certain.

I didn't think the facade of The Coveted could be broken, no matter how hard I tried, but a clumsy mistake like this could stir up questions. That was scrutiny I'd spent my life avoiding at all costs. When people started to question, to doubt my magic, they became desperate to test it. I had a few lingering scars on my body from impatient, desperate people attempting to ring the magic from me.

Hyper-aware of the prince in my periphery, I expected him to address me. Instead, his posture remained tense, brow furrowed as he stared at his own boots before returning his attention to Crixby.

"Uh." Crixby shifted on his feet, waiting for someone to say something, an explanation of the puzzling statement.

I clenched the stone beneath the yellow fabric with a sweaty palm, white blooming across my knuckles. I wouldn't clarify

what it meant, even if the man asked. Even if the prince asked.

“Take with that what you will, Sir Crixby,” Prince Nicholas projected his powerful voice into the room. “For now, we have no further business.”

Crixby grimaced, then marched out of the room, nudging the other citizens in line to clear his path.

The prince leaned toward me to whisper. “I didn’t mean to catch you off guard.”

I shook my head, trying to play it off like that wasn’t the case when it very much was.

Unconvincing, I supposed, as the prince said, “The gods have given you a gift. Do not be ashamed of it.” He offered an encouraging smile, and relief swelled within my chest that I didn’t disappoint him. Regardless of Crixby or Marco’s judgment, it seemed the prince was still on my side. Maybe that was enough.

Mira



A couple weeks had gone by since that horrifying day in the grand hall. Prince Nicholas hadn't called on me for any other meetings, which I was grateful for. It seemed business within the kingdom had suddenly picked up and his schedule became crowded. At least, that's what Adalene had noticed. With the excuse of my monthly cycle this past week, I had stayed hidden in my room.

The snap of glowing embers in the quiet night didn't offer the comfort it once had. The book of poems laid unopened beside me. My gaze became engulfed by the billowing flames, and the room felt smaller than it ever had.

That meeting with the magic wielder in the castle never came to fruition. Through Adalene, I'd heard she'd gone on an impromptu vacation, though rumors swirled she'd upped and quit. Gone without a trace. Regardless, that left me unable to acquire any further insights as to the treatment of magic wielders within these walls.

But Nicholas seemed like a good man. My intuition hadn't told me I was in danger and the idea that I could spend the rest of my life here, like this...

Just outside the door were guards. Not one action I could take would go unnoticed—always accounted for, always monitored. I wished I still saw it as safety, but a relentless gnawing under my skin gave the familiar bite of *prisoner*.

Adalene had mentioned in passing about growing conflicts within the lower town, but assured me not to worry. A track record like mine made that almost entirely impossible.

With the best pain tonics in the kingdom, this week had been one of the greatest in my life. Comfortable and left alone. But now, looming anxiety grew over being put on display again.

My forehead tensed as I internally cursed myself.

This is literally the best I will ever get. It's the best anybody could get. Living in a castle, being waited on, provided for. Warm. Full. Protected. I should be feeling grateful. So grateful and happy that I think I might burst. Yet, I'm sitting here, feeling like the walls are shrinking around me. Just be happy. Be happy, Mira.

I shut my eyes tight and rocked myself, the grips of my fingers digging into the cushion beneath me. Maybe the harder I gripped, the more stable I'd feel. The taut fabric groaned against my vicious hold, and my ears filled with the sounds of my centering breaths.

Mumbling male voices in the hallway stole my attention. My gaze shot to the door in time to watch shadowed footsteps depart. I barely moved an inch, focused intently. Watched. Listened.

Candlelight in the hall was minimal, so I squinted, trying to see any subtle movements of the posted guards.

But the silence outside my door felt different. It felt...empty.

I padded over with quiet steps and leaned my ear against it. Not a single sound. Turning the handle slowly, it clicked and released from the seal of the frame. I drew it back, cracking it open just a couple inches, and glimpsed into the hallway.

Not a soul.

I opened it more and stepped forward, glancing left and right. Not one guardsman was present.

I dared the thought. *What if I leave?*

I'd never allowed myself to exercise any perceived freedom for fear of consequences. But here, in these royal halls, stood an opportunity. Something itched beneath my skin, something I couldn't scratch unless...unless I moved.

Without wasting a moment, I ran and tossed on the pale blue quilted night robe to cover my shift. When I breached the hall, I closed my door behind me, softening the click with measured movements.

Where to go? Anywhere I wanted, I supposed. My lungs filled with the air of freedom, a liberating release from being sheltered away.

I began an unknown journey, my feet carrying me with desires of their own. My heart barreled against the walls in my chest, the rhythm beckoning my steps to match. Faster and faster I carried myself, nimble and silent steps sinking into the carpet

runners. Bending at the waist to peer around every corner, I kept an eye out for guards, but the halls remained barren.

My bare feet kissed plush fabric with each step and were shocked against the chill of the stone in between. It was lovely. Crossed arms kept the robe secured to me, fighting off the brisk night air circulating through the stoic building from the occasional open windows. Sometimes during the day I would stand at them with Adalene, taking in the sight of the open ocean, drinking in the salty sea air. Not tonight.

Tonight, I had a castle to explore.

Corner after corner, corridor after corridor, I began to wonder if the castle had been abandoned. Or maybe this was just how it looked after the sun went down? I'd only ever slept through the night since I'd been here, I wouldn't have noticed. But the pain tonics had sedative properties, leaving me wide-awake after a long nap during the day.

At some point I'd stopped keeping track of my path, too indulged in the reckless adventure. An animal no longer caged, with curiosity finally allowed to stretch. I'd wound up in a part of the castle I didn't recognize. A grain of panic clung to me as viscerally as my shift. Ideally, I'd return to my room tonight with no one being the wiser. A secret just for me.

Metal clattered upon stony floors from around the next corner. It sent my heart leaping into my throat.

"*Shit,*" the unknown woman cursed under her breath.

Already pressing my back to the wall, I subtly leaned around to see. A worker hurried to pick up dropped utensils from the ground. She cast a frantic glare around the hall. Probably on the lookout for Magda, trying to clean up her mess before the matron could reprimand her.

I heard it in her voice and saw it on her face. The panic. What would happen if she were caught making a mistake? Would she be punished? I could remain hidden, unnoticed until she finished her task and departed, but...flashes of the little boy in the market dropping his hat played in my mind. I'd been too afraid then to do anything. No longer.

"Do you need help?" I asked, rounding the corner.

"Oh! I, uh—" Her wide brown eyes honed in on me.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to startle you." I walked toward her and crouched by her side, picking up the scattered gold plated silverware. My loose hair swooped down in front of me, and I tucked it behind my ear.

"That's some hair you have," she noted.

I chuckled. Indeed it was. It'd been weeks since I'd worn a hood to cover it, but it still felt strange having it out in the open. I noticed her hair's coloring, red as well, but more natural. Darker. "You too."

She quickly pulled a section over her shoulder, bringing it to the front, smoothing her hands over top. "Not like that." She pointed her chin at me, offering a casual laugh before grabbing more spoons.

I shrugged. "Part of the package, I guess." I offered the handful of cutlery I'd collected.

We held still for a moment, her hesitancy to take them from me becoming clear. My gaze wandered to where she'd stowed the others she'd dropped, and I caught the glint of prongs and handles protruding from her belt.

Our eyes met. A staff girl wouldn't be cramming stray cutlery into her clothing. She reached out timidly and took the handful from me. I didn't fight her.

"I wouldn't let any of the guards see you," I counseled, intending not to pry on whatever business she felt she needed to do.

Her lips flattened into a knowing smile. We both understood the situation.

"I don't think there are any within the walls right now." She worked to shove the rest in any free space around her waistband, then hoisted the white apron over the tops, covering the evidence.

"Why?" I rose to my feet, following her lead.

"The prince went out to the lower markets earlier. Apparently he needed a castle's worth of an escort crew." Her eyebrows briefly jumped, clearly unimpressed. "A little paranoid, if you ask me. Not that I'm complaining." Again, she fiddled with her hair over her shoulder, which I swore moved on its own before she smoothed it down. She faced me then.

I signaled my understanding, and she gave me a weary once over.

"Thanks. And if you could, you know, not mention this." She gestured to her tucked trove of cutlery. "That'd be great. Not all of us get to live in a swanky castle, you know? I'm sure the prince won't miss these." She gave me a supplicating smile and a wink before she bound down the hallway with unexpected grace before turning a corner and disappearing into the quiet night.

The idea of an unguarded castle was...unsettling. Sure, she was here for some spoons and forks, but if thieves could roam these halls freely without consequence, I thought it best to return to my quarters.

If I could find my way back.

Empty halls that minutes ago had seemed tempting to explore, unrestricted, now seemed more looming. What could call a prince and his entire guard away in the night? I'd never had a captor that left me this vulnerable. I wrapped my hands tightly around my arms as I walked, chewing on my bottom lip when the familiar route that fed into the grand hall came into view.

Not a single guard at the doors.

I picked up on a few male voices arguing, and curiosity beckoned me toward the sound. Keeping close to the wall, I moved until I stopped just shy of the room.

"I told you announcing her here wouldn't help matters," Prince Nicholas said.

"They need the hope of The Coveted. Surely that will provide them with some comfort, cool their flaring tempers on the whole," his counselor said, that cherub-faced man.

"Do you think that's working, Ricks?" Marco's recognizable taunt chimed in. "Seems you've stirred them to upset, flaunting something valuable. Reports coming in from multiple taverns, didn't you say, with murmurings of the *selfish* prince? Hiding away in his tower with the famed girl who grants desires while kidnappings steadily continue?"

Kidnappings?

"Then maybe we send a strong military presence down there. It would thwart any ideas of reckless behavior tonight, and if we kept them down there, the criminals may be inclined to put an end to their dealings. It'd be an added measure of security for those concerned. Or perhaps we bring the girl to the people, on their own territory," the counselor suggested, an attempt to quell the miscalculation on his end.

"No," Nicholas's reply was sharp. "I don't want to increase patrols, and the girl hasn't fulfilled her purpose here."

My blood pounded like an anvil in my ears. He *did* have a purpose for me, and he'd lied. The thought of being placed in the midst of poor, desperate people had my fingertips digging into the wall for support. My position was more precarious than I'd thought.

And why wouldn't Nicholas send his soldiers if it meant reducing kidnappings? Or quell drunken men's ambitions of taking me for themselves?

"What's that?" the other man asked.

"If she can't bring stability from here, she might fan the flames of discontentment further. I also haven't asked her for specifics. For now, we clean up our own mess. Your men will de-escalate as normal, and then they will report back for reassignment," Nicholas said.

"Yes, Your Highness," the man replied. "The regular patrols will monitor any growing threat and report back. Any who dare cause organized trouble will see the executioner's blade up close."

"Good," the prince confirmed.

"Your Highness, please, reconsider," the counselor pleaded.

"I said no!" Nicholas snapped.

I reared my head back against the wall, as if trying to shield myself from the blades of his anger.

Nausea roiled through me.

"Keep them out of the towns, Commander," the prince repeated.

A cold sweat broke over my palms. *Good*, the prince said in regards to ending human life.

I'd witnessed him for hours, extending kindness and grace to each villager's request. I couldn't understand why that same man would refrain from sending extra soldiers to a town when they needed it. How could he present one way in public, but now speak with such malice?

I felt light-headed. This must have been what the witch was warning me about.

I tore myself from the wall, making my way back to my room on silent feet. As I slipped under the weight of the plush blankets and rested in the darkness that swayed against the dying flame, I wrestled with what I'd discovered tonight.

Things are definitely not as they seem.




Mira




That pit of uncertainty inside me only grew as the weeks passed. Though the prince hadn't called on me for any more appearances. I was left to wonder how long his hospitality would last. Clearly he had limits, and I had no idea how long he'd wait for my blessing to work on whatever it was he truly wanted.

Adalene's responsibilities increased with preparations for some upcoming events, and she couldn't remain by my side as often as before. That was alright.

Snow fell in beautiful fluffy flakes, landing with softness in the mostly undisturbed garden. I lowered my hood, tilting my head toward the sky. My tongue attempted to catch some, but I couldn't see them coming from the dark backdrop of night.

Only part of the path had been shoveled, but I didn't mind making my own. Every evening I made my way out here, inviting the crisp air and open sky to ease my discontentment.

Every inhale attempted to cleanse me of it. Reminding myself that despite the uncertainty I lived with, it was better than being locked behind bars. That often brought a few moments of clarity and appreciation.

Voices carried over the sparkling white blanket and pulled my attention to the top of the courtyard. Guards ran from their post, leaving me completely alone out here in this penned paradise. That sight became less shocking as the weeks went on.

It didn't happen every day by any means, but it already seemed normal. I hadn't run into anymore looting staff during my unsupervised nights, which was good. Though, I had yet to leave my emerald stone unattended since.

I caressed the smooth side of the gem in my pocket with the pad of my thumb. Even though it was hidden under my cloak, I swore I could feel where each swirl of green ended and began.

Something about it grounded me, and I relied on that every time I became unsure of my existence here. Continuing forward in a lazy zigzag pattern, I sank deeper into the garden. On this blank canvas, I could create whatever I wanted.

A twig snapped, and branches rustled in the distance. I looked toward the sound, but a few clouds had blocked most of the moonlight, making nothing discernible in the darkness and shadows near the walls. Probably branches giving way to heavy snow.

Turning my focus back to my design, I started leaping, creating gaps in my trail. There was no pre-planned picture or forethought, just a girl left alone, away from prying eyes.

Mid jump, the sound repeated—louder. When I landed, I straightened and shot my gaze toward the source. I didn't need more than dull moonlight to tell me what came into view.

A massive beast.

Fear and adrenaline surged through me in an instant. My body begged to run, but I couldn't move. Any attempt I made would be futile, anyway.

Whirls of hot steam shot from its nostrils on every ragged, snarling exhale. The silhouette of its shoulders bobbed up and down, contracting its menacing mass. It stood eight feet tall, maybe ten. Wide-set shoulders tapered into a tiny waist, then shot out into muscular thighs. A body equipped with brute strength and speed. The shape of its ears, claws, and stance of its feet mimicked a wolf standing upright.

Though not one of natural creation.

Many strange creatures existed in other parts of the land, but I didn't think any lived close to Highcrest. What was it doing here? If I screamed, who would hear me? The guards had left, leaving me utterly alone. Defenseless. Abandoned.

I hadn't even come face-to-face with actual wolves enough to know how to defend myself, but certainly those tactics would fail me here, regardless. Sweat beaded from my pores, and my heart strained against my lungs, the cold night air suddenly blazing.

It lunged, the movement so swift I barely even gasped by the time it grabbed me. The impact knocked the wind from my lungs and turned the world into a dizzying array of shadows and fur. My feet lost connection with the ground, and I swung in its hold

as it charged to the other side of the garden. The towering stone walls that bordered the perimeter, the ones that'd fortified the castle from intruders, the ones that caged me inside, moved underneath me in a blur as the beast catapulted us over, as if they were no barrier at all.

My stomach plummeted as we landed on the other side. Snow flew in all directions from the creature's harsh landing, but it wasted no time. Forceful strides quickly carried me away from the castle, heading for the forest that lay not far outside the grounds. Guards shouted, their cries ringing into the night, but every step tossed me back and forth, giving me no chance to lock on to any potential rescuers.

With preternatural speed, we arrived at the forest's edge, becoming shrouded by the dense trees. The pungent aroma of pine on brisk air clogged my nostrils. Moonlight fought to tear through the canopy of needles from what I could see between glimpses of furry roving feet beneath and slashes of branches in my jostling vision above.

I could no longer hear the guards shouting, and judging by how fast we were going and the depth of the snow, we'd already gained considerable ground between us.

Its pounding feet broke through the white powder with little effort. I was being shaken like a rag doll, unable to focus on any specific direction for long. It breathed ferociously into the would be serene wood.

Tiny cuts burned my increasingly cold skin as dead branches gave way to the creature's force. I'd somehow managed to grip the creature's arm, an attempt to hold myself steady. Stray branches peppered my skin with nicks and scratches, one digging particularly deep through my mitten.

I couldn't hold in the hiss of pain. As if the cursed animal heard my cries, it dragged me over its shoulder, now cradling me at its front. Pressed firmly against its chest, I watched as its great arm and claws tore through and slashed at every oncoming wayward branch.

I welcomed the warmth that it now provided to my back, but I also battled the dizziness and fright that ripped through me as viscerally as the twigs had. I didn't face any further assault from armed trees, but to what end?

A new chill gripped my insides, and I tasted the sour resignation of imminent death dancing on my tongue. At any second, the beast could stop and decide it needed a snack for its trek. A vision appeared in my mind: crimson as vibrant as my hair splattering the pure white ground. Tears blurred my already shaky vision.

Stolen, kidnapped, abducted. I thought I'd experienced every version, but this, this took the cake. Cake, one of the delicious desserts at the castle that I'd never taste again. Or the warm, spiced potatoes in the morning with the freshest fruit juice. Or the wine. Not that I'd had more after that first dinner. I now regretted not drinking barrels.

A single tear trailed down the side of my nose before jerking motions propelled it off. The tear's path instantly turned frigid on my skin from the unrelenting whipping wind. Vomit threatened to spill, thinking there may soon come a time when even *this* moment would be preferential to something that was to come.

My midsection ached from being secured too tightly, my insides becoming battered and bruised. The skin on my face screamed from the fury of winter continually slapping against it. I didn't know how long we'd been running, but I couldn't take much more. Had it been twenty minutes? An hour? And how had its stride never faltered?

For the first time since it'd snatched me, I started pounding my fists against its arm and kicking my feet. Everything I'd done up until this point had been to survive, and I needed to keep trying.

"Stop!" The strained scream sliced my throat.

Unaffected. The creature was wholly unaffected. My body continued jostling with every forceful sprint.

"Please!" I cried, knowing my plea would fall on uncomprehending ears. The beating continued uninterrupted, and I couldn't stop the tears from falling.

Powerless. A feeling I knew intimately, only this time, amplified. No cryptic words or vows of silence would influence this creature. I sent up my silent, petrified screams to the gods.

I imagined the council of eternal beings convening at a golden table overflowing with food and drink, watching over our world, placing bets on their favorites and throwing obstacles and tragedies in the way of their opponents' players. How else could anyone explain this life, if not a cruel game?

Their jovial, gluttonous laughter reverberating off solid gold walls and decorations as they glimpsed upon an innocent child and chose her for their amusement. Sending a witch to cast a spell and change the trajectory of my fate.

Or, perhaps even worse, I didn't matter to them at all.

What if I'd brought this on myself? What if they'd recognized my reservations at the castle and became angry? If I'd been more grateful, if I'd just stuck to playing the role they'd sent me to play, a quiet, timid, unimposing woman, they would have let me live lavishly by their hand.

Instead, I faced a dead winter's night in the arms of a feral beast itching to rip me to shreds.

Gods, if you can hear me, please save me from this monstrous fate.

My heart bled to them, placing myself at their mercy, hoping they would extend grace. How it could be possible, I didn't know, but they had the power to do something.

Another rough landing forced my closed eyes to open, sending more warm tears flying into the wilderness.

That's when I knew my prayers would go unanswered. A normal forest would resemble a sleeping wood—the leaves fallen, branches stripped and bare until the kiss of spring's warmth touched their roots.

Nothing like this.

The air thickened with a chalky, smoky residue, and the beautiful, pure white snow dulled to gray under the contrast of the sickly obsidian trees.

A shiver ran down my already cold spine.

We were in The Cursed Kingdom.



Mira

Adrenaline ebbed the pains in my body, but only for a moment. I squirmed and wriggled under the beast's grasp, more desperate than before. Something about reaching this place cursed by the gods made my inevitable demise feel more real, and I wasn't ready.

I attempted digging into its arms again, to pry myself free, but my fingers were so cold I doubted they bent like I thought they were. My cheeks could barely move. Frost coated my lashes with every strained blink. I wondered how much longer I could survive the journey. Maybe it would be more merciful if I didn't.

Softened cries sputtered from my chattering lips until my muscles gave out. I couldn't fight, couldn't even hold myself upright. The cold had seeped so thoroughly within me that I had nothing left to give. My body slumped in its grip. Mustering the last of what I had, I continued my weakening protest until the darkness consumed me.



The familiar song of embers sang to me, and I envisioned the fireplace in my room at the castle. Surrounded by a cocoon of comfort in the heavenly, pillow bed, I pictured Adalene waltzing in wearing her usual chipper smile.

Then I felt the cold.

My forehead fought to wrinkle when I peeled my eyes open. A fire burned in the midst of a clearing. Dark, thin trees snaked from the ground, reaching toward the sky. I remembered where I was.

The inhospitable chill seeped into all the parts of my side that lay in the snowy bank. If my muscles weren't almost completely frozen, I would have jolted upright. But that, paired with the stiffness of my aching torso, kept me still. Heat from the fire, and something at my back, and under my neck, had revived me. My body swayed, but not by me. From something behind me. No, wrapped *around* me.

I craned my head slowly, feeling soft fur brush against my cheek, until the moonlit silhouette of the beast hit my eye. Why it hadn't devoured me yet, I wasn't sure. Maybe it was tired from lugging me across an entire kingdom's forest into the next.

Now it guarded me, protecting its meal until it woke. Was it sleeping? I couldn't tell.

My gaze set on the slow, rhythmic rise and fall of the creature's body. It probably was.

Did I have much of a chance of making it out alive? No—but no matter how slim, I needed to take it. I moved imperceptibly slow, praying the beast was too exhausted to notice. The snow made its squeaky crunch as I rolled onto my stomach. The animal's draped arm slipped from me to the ground.

The fire burned so close. I didn't have much more space until I'd be completely in it. That somehow still beating organ in my chest pounded against my ribs like a fist. I lay still, monitoring for signs that it'd noticed my attempt at escape. It didn't stir.

Time to move.

I pushed onto all fours, letting the snow settle under my palms and knees with every subtle shift to douse the sound. My gaze dared to travel until it met the closed eyes of the snouted creature.

One bite of its great mouth would be enough to take my head clean off. Only the piercing tips of a few teeth rested outside of its closed maw, but fear trickled through me, imagining what the rest looked like. I swallowed, calling on whatever inner courage I could muster to keep moving.

Rearing back, I crouched before standing. The drum of my heartbeat continued to play in my ears. My motions were steeped in caution as I took a weary step back. I slowly let my foot sink into the snow. Lifting the other, I repeated the movement with

precision.

Luckily the snapping fire provided some noise coverage, so when I accidentally backed into a branch, causing it to break, the beast didn't stir. A cloud formed before my face from relief, but I couldn't back up blindly anymore. I had to turn. I had to *run*, but not until I was out of its earshot.

Each breath was measured as step by step, I gained distance. Looking over my shoulder, the fire now appeared as an orange glowing dot through the thickets. The danger most certainly wasn't gone, but the gods had aided my escape. They must have. Hope sprung anew, like a geyser bursting from the frozen ground.

If they blessed my escape, they'd surely continue to keep me protected.

I bolted.

As my vision adjusted to the night, I ducked and swerved around branches reaching out to claw me as I sprinted.

Whirling clouds of steam huffed from my burning lungs, but I wouldn't stop. All my nights wandering the castle gardens after sunset had me memorizing the stars in the sky. I searched for the twinkling patterns I recognized, but between watching where I was going and the steam blocking my view, I couldn't concentrate long enough to orient myself.

Without knowing my position, I had no indicator if I was running further into the cursed forest, or from it. I stopped dead in my tracks, my chest heaving and burning from the frigid air, my throat parched, my skin cold but damp with sweat. Looking down at my sunken feet, an alarming thought took form.

A clear path of my footprints in the otherwise unmarked snow was a dead giveaway to my position. I had no advantage of speed, no hope of outrunning this creature who would probably track me even without the obvious trail. As much as I wanted to keep going, I needed to give myself an edge.

As much as it fought against every embedded instinct of survival, I devised a plan. Walking backwards, I intentionally placed my feet back in my previously made steps. Moving back toward the creature had nervous sweat drench my body anew, but as soon as I couldn't see the top of my path, I booked a hard right.

Kicking up snow with every battle against the deep quicksand of winter, I didn't stop. Even when my ribs hurt from expanding, pressing against the tender tissue from the journey here, I kept going.

I kept going until I stopped myself again and repeated my plan of aversion. Then I bolted left. Clouds in the sky moved across the expanse, preventing me from getting a read on my position still.

When I hit a fairly wide clearing, I fixed my gaze on the sky. Without having to worry about branches for the time being, I needed to figure out which way was south, back to Highcrest. The dawn of morning started to lighten the horizon, but I could still decipher those damn stars if the clouds would just clear.

My feet kept moving, survival and fear refusing to let me stop as I glanced skyward, until I collided against something. A solid mass had me stumbling backwards, tripping over myself until I crashed into the snow. Demonic, haunting eyes greeted me and I choked on my gasp.

Skin the color of moss hovered over me, making me question my sanity. Animal leathers wrapped around his broad body and groaned as he bent down. A bald head, large ears, and a wide, greedy smile glared at me before he reached down and grabbed the front of my cape with his massive hand. He picked me up like I weighed no more than a feather, swinging me with his swaying arm like nothing more than a handbag.

Stories of deadly ogres roaming the forests filled local taverns and campfires, snippets making their way back to me over the years. Vicious, blood-thirsty creatures, hungry for human flesh. If I hadn't already been sweating, I certainly would be now.

I balled my fist, repeatedly landing blows to the hand that carried me like a sack of flour, but he seemed unbothered. Deep, inhuman grunts echoed from him as he plowed through the deep snow. Relaxing the strain that kept my body tense as a board, I reared my head back. With the ground at the top of my vision, and the sky at the bottom, I adjusted my perception of the world in order to glean where we were headed.

The silhouette of another ogre appeared through the trees when I hit the apex of his swing.

There were two of them.

Swallowing the lump of vomit that threatened to choke me, I panicked, clawing and smacking at his grasp with more vigor.

"Let me go! No!" I shrieked into the desolate forest, nothing but birds, squirrels, and two ogres to hear my cries. "Stop!"

The one we were coming toward stepped aside. That's when I spotted the open flame.

My protests didn't relent, but they made no difference. They exchanged grunts between each other, somehow communicating through no words, only guttural sounds. He hoisted me upright and slammed my back against a tree. The hit was dizzying, and before I could recover, a thick rope began tying me to the trunk.

The other ogre walked around and around until my entire abdomen was secured. He'd pinned my hands down, leaving my feet to dangle above the ground. They turned their backs to me, acting like it made no difference whether I was there or not, whether I struggled or screamed.

I watched them tend to the fire and collect sturdy branches. My scrutinizing stare didn't let up until I finally pieced together their tasks. Crossed bundles tied together on either side of the fire, thicker, long logs scattered around.

They were setting up a spit.

My eyes widened. I did my best to shimmy under the tight bands constricting me, but they had no give. I looked toward the skies. Warm tears blurred my vision when I noticed the clouds had completely given way, displaying the firmament clearly.

What wicked humor the gods had, giving me the information I desperately needed with no way to use it. Nevertheless, they had to be on my side. They just had to. A tear traced my cheek as I squeezed my eyes shut, silently calling out to them, desperately pleading for help.

Their grunting continued, breaking my concentration. They exchanged approval over the selected unbendable branch of which they'd fasten me to.

Coveted for a meal. Certainly not how I'd imagined my end, but one way or another, I knew my 'blessing' would lead to my demise.

Uneven bark dug into my back, my dangling feet kicking at nothing in pathetically small increments. Defeat seized me with its devastating grip as I clung to this tree, watching the orange flames that would soon singe my skin.

With my arms strapped to my torso, it didn't take much effort for my palm to feel along my hip, searching for one last moment of comfort.

My stomach dropped when I realized there was no familiar bump in my pocket. Chest tightening, my fingers frantically searched for evidence to the contrary. I tilted and maneuvered with all the strength I had, trying to increase my reach.

Clawing the fabric, I tugged the material until I reached the end of the pocket. Empty. Somewhere between the castle and here, my only owned possession got lost. Tears streamed down my cheeks unrestrained. I didn't want to die alone.

One of the ogres pivoted from assessing the fire and stepped toward me.

"No, no, no, no, no!" My pleas fought their way out.

He untied the rope, and I scraped down the tree as gravity took hold. Through the mess of falling rope, he snatched my wrist and tugged me forward. I tripped over the cords at my ankles, but he hauled me up, nearly ripping my arm from its socket as he did.

"No, please!" I screamed.

The heat of the fire caressed my skin on approach. Minutes ago, I would have savored warmth against the frigid winter. Now, it was the last thing I wanted to feel. He flung my body around, surveying the best way to anchor me to the log.

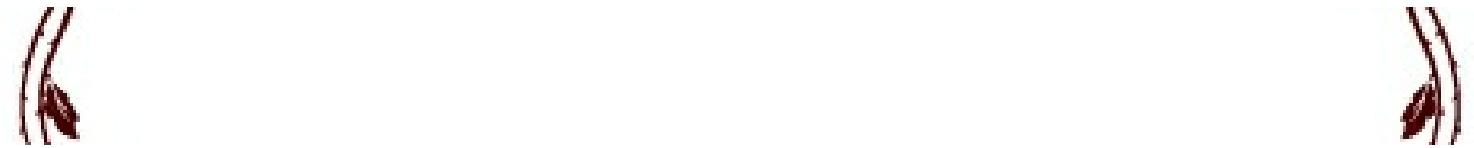
"Now, I didn't take you boys for thieves?" A voice crooned from behind us.

When my eyes fell upon a creature leaning casually against the tree I had just been secured to, I couldn't believe what I was seeing.

The beast.



Mira



My jaw would have landed in the snow had it not been attached. I scoped the surrounding woods for someone, anyone who could have spoken, but it was just the beast, the ogres, and me.

The ogres hurtled grunts and shrugs at the wolf-like beast. Obviously, any consideration for me was disregarded as I jostled in his grip.

“This one’s mine.”

I’d seen it. The beast’s mouth. It moved as he spoke. A masculine voice that sounded so human had me blinking multiple times in an attempt to clear my vision. Had I hit my head at some point?

Whatever the ogres were communicating, they weren’t happy. Their gestures became more frantic, but the one released his grip, tossing me into the snowbank closer to the feet of the beast. The cold bit into my skin. I lifted my face, now covered in snow, my hands splayed out in front of me.

The beast stepped forward, kicking snow over my mittens with his last step. I didn’t know what it was about my cape acting like the scruff of my neck, but creatures certainly liked to grab me by it.

“Much obliged, gentlemen,” he said before setting me on my feet and yanking me toward the direction he’d come, his grip on my cloak unwavering.

The ogres grumbled and kicked at the make-shift spit they’d created. Wood smacked together, and the fire hissed as snow washed over the flames.

I was all too happy to leave that horrific scene, even as my feet scrambled to keep up with the beast’s large strides. Once we approached the clearing where the ogre first nabbed me, the sky had shifted to a mix of light blue and breaking orange. When I was certain we left the ogres far enough behind, I spoke.

“Y-you saved me.” My feet fought against the snowy depths, and the sound of his determined stomps breaking the white surface made me question if I’d been loud enough for him to hear.

He didn’t say anything, but now I knew he could.

“Where are you taking me?!” I demanded.

Still, he didn’t speak.

How much more would I suffer in this forest? My back burned from being secured to that tree, and my ribcage still felt tender from this brute earlier.

Maybe he could speak, but it bore no indication over whether this creature understood empathy. “Please, slow down! I’m in pain!”

To my surprise, he released the grip on my cape. I staggered to the ground. My mitten covered palms sunk into the cold snow, catching my fall.

“Where are you taking me?” I asked without raising myself, needing a moment to catch my breath. My curls draped my face, but I tilted to look up at him through the red tendrils.

He towered over me, his silken fur heaving over his muscled stature. With the dawning morn, I could see the variations of his brown coloring. “Are you hungry?” he asked.

Confusion cut through every emotion I held onto. “I-what?”

“Are. You. Hun-gry.” He stalled his words like I struggled to understand the language, not the fact that his question was so unexpected.

“Um.” I grappled with finding an answer. Was I? What would it mean if I was? Did he have food around here somewhere? “Yes.” Call it morbid curiosity, I had to know.

“Then you better quit making this trip longer.” He snarled, then stormed off into the woods, leaving me behind.

Charming.

I twisted my neck, making sure no ogres were stalking our path.

“I don’t have all day,” the beast frustratingly growled from his halted position a few yards ahead.

I found myself getting to my feet, dusting off snow and taking steps to follow him before I even had a chance to register what I was doing.

Snap out of it, Mira. I shook my head and stopped in my tracks, watching the beast storm off into the woods. The rising sun filtered through the thickets, showering the day with a new dawn of possibilities. Remembering the pattern I’d briefly gleaned from the stars, I knew the direction I needed to follow. My gaze narrowed to the south.

“If you try running, I’ll carry you like last time,” his dimming voice called as he marched onward.

I raised my hand to my ribs and rested it along the surely bruised flesh. A repeat of the journey would be too much. So, as conditioned my entire life to listen and obey, I began to follow the beast’s massive footprints.

Shifting snow under every step created a burning in my lungs trudging through the resistance. When I realized the beast had stopped, gratitude grew before fear quelled it. As I closed the distance between us, I wondered what would happen at the end of my trek, when we got to...wherever he was taking me.

We’d returned to the area I’d awoke in, my footprints clearly visible from my attempted escape as the sun brightened the forest. All of that effort for nothing, a reminder that I held no power to change any of this. The beast crouched over the fire as he tended to it, reviving the flame.

I huffed and puffed, my legs weary and wanting to give out from underneath me. Black spots enshrouded my vision, and I stumbled to the side, leaning against a tree for support.

“You wouldn’t be so tired if you didn’t run,” he reprimanded, irritation pouring out as he angrily poked at the fire. Embers floated into the air at the disturbance.

My cheeks heated. I knew better than to resist, but this was not my normal circumstance. I remained in the outskirts of the clearing.

“Come. Warm up. You’ll catch your death out here.”

Unsure if his statement was born of concern or threat, I was out of options. My toes lost feeling a while back, and the fire tempted me too much to say no. I ambled through the snow until I walked to the side of the flame. Holding out my hands, heat bloomed into my mittens, and I nearly melted.

I wouldn’t admit it out loud, but he’d been right. My body desperately craved freedom from this frigid weather. Though, concern still nipped at my thoughts, wondering if this was just prepping me for a tasty meal.

“Rest,” he said.

“The ground is too cold,” I said softly, recalling how half my body was nearly numb when I’d woken in the night. His body heat had kept the rest of me warm, but that certainly wasn’t an option now.

His canine gaze scanned me from head to toe. One of his ears twitched before he stomped into the tree line. Cracks and snaps echoed over the blanket of snow, and he came traipsing out, part of a felled tree dragging behind. He closed the space between us, and though my heart beat frantically, I remained glued in place.

He tossed the tree a few feet away from the fire, then gestured at it. A seat. I nodded, keeping my head low, fearful of staring into his eyes. I sat and stilled while the heat of the fire made its way to my frozen limbs.

The beast sat in the snow, claws interlinked, arms wrapped around raised knees splayed to the sides. I was careful not to stare, only allowing my eyes to flit ever so briefly to him before fixing my gaze on the fire. But I could feel my curiosity bubbling to the surface, and couldn’t fight it any longer.

“Where are we going?”

He remained silent.

I didn’t ask *why* he’d taken me. Surely, he knew who I was. The chances of an abduction from the castle by a creature of myth seemed too random, especially given my history. The possibility that I wasn’t just going to be a meal flashed across my mind. If this beast could speak, he most certainly held desires. And just as all the others before him, I was here to fulfill them.

The longer he remained silent, the more compelled I felt to seek answers. Definitely a new experience for me. “Well, I know you’ve taken me to The Cursed Kingdom. That much is evident. Are we to stay in the middle of the forest? I don’t think I can survive out here for much longer.” My toes curled, trying to gain more circulation.

An ache for the comforts of the castle seized me. I clutched my cape, securing it tighter to my body. Painful shivers tensed my skin, in the parts that I could still feel, anyway, and emotions built in my throat. Tears brimmed my eyeliner. I didn’t want to die out here.

One escaped, trailing down my cheek. I wiped it away with a sniffle. It’d been years since I cried in front of a captor, but I found myself with no well of composure left. Overwhelmed—I was utterly overwhelmed. And miserable in the cold. Sore, tired, hungry. And so very thirsty.

“Once you’ve warmed up, we’ll finish our trip.”

My gaze shot to him. I hadn’t expected an answer, or him to say anything, really. He didn’t make eye contact. I returned to staring at the flames, wondering what ‘*finish our trip*’ would mean for me.




Mira




Once I could feel my toes, I felt a little lighter in spirit. My backside hurt from the uncomfortable log, but at least it wasn't numb from sitting in the snow. Maybe twenty minutes had passed, and neither of us had exchanged a word.

"We should leave. I want to make sure we get back before nightfall. Unless you'd rather sleep in the woods again?"

"No, I wouldn't," I answered honestly.

He swung his massive foot and kicked a wave of snow over the fire, dousing the entire thing. The dying flames hissed in their final moments. I already missed the comfort, but I stood and readied myself to follow him. We headed north, further into The Cursed Kingdom.

My head remained on a swivel, watching for any movement. The only things that I spotted were small woodland creatures and snow falling from trees. Thank the gods we hadn't come across anymore ogres.

I found myself wanting to ask questions as I trailed the path he left in the snow so I didn't have to trudge through myself. Questions like, did all creatures in this forest understand my language? That knowledge would come in handy if I came face-to-face with others—though I hoped that wouldn't be the case.

Other questions like, what would a beast want with The Coveted?

People were people. Similar thoughts and patterns, at least from what I'd witnessed in my life. Maybe if I could see more similarities between this creature and what I knew to be true, I could navigate this horrifying situation better.

My understanding of the world tilted on its axis, and I had no help this time like Adalene.

Was the beast even my captor? Maybe he was sent by another, just as the guardsmen had been. As far as I knew, cursed beasts were the only ones left to inhabit this land. What was once a thriving kingdom had collapsed from one man's greed and hunger for power a century ago.

Residue of his dark magic stained the land, creating monstrous beasts. People fled when the curse spread, leaving the kingdom abandoned except for those hideous creatures. I didn't know much more beyond that. Since then, magic had been persecuted, left to dwindle over time.

Would being here infect me, too? Morph me into something unrecognizable? More questions piled on, but I remained silent, latching onto the only certainty I had—my routine. Maybe knowing the fate that awaited me would be worse anyway, drag out the anticipation.

We continued through the long forgotten land. A cloudless blue sky shone a new light over the forest. It still looked decrepit, but not as ominous in the day. The air was crisp, less suffocating than it'd been when we first entered.

Probably an hour had passed, and my lungs constricted painfully with every breath, crying for a break. I'd worked up a sweat, but couldn't feel the tips of my fingers or toes. Every forced breath fogged before me. "Can we stop? I just need a minute." Placing my hands on my knees, I bent over.

Black stars dotted the edges of my vision. Crunching steps strode toward me. When I glanced up, I found the beast crouched, his back facing me.

"W-what are you doing?"

"It will take too long to continue at this pace, let alone have breaks. You said you hurt from the last way I carried you."

I blinked in rapid succession. He presented his back for me to...hop on?

"Like a piggyback ride?" I laughed at the absurdity, still flirting with the concept of blacking out where I stood. Never in my life had I crawled onto someone's back, aside from childhood memories that were too painful to recall.

"I don't think *piggy* is the right term here, but sure."

Swallowing my hesitation, I took a step forward. I placed my hand on the beast's fur covered shoulder and leaned over him slowly. He was soft as silk against the skin on my hand that peeked through the ripped mitten. It took all my strength to adjust myself, my weak muscles shaking from the strain.

Wrapping my forearm around his neck, he lifted from the ground before I was ready. I shrieked and my legs swung abruptly, clinging desperately around him. Before he stood to his fullest height, his arms hooked under my knees, securing me in place.

In a quick jerking movement, he tossed me up, placing me higher on his back, allowing me to get a sturdy grip. Before I had time to say anything, he took off.

I clung to the beast as we sailed through the forest.

The amount of time it would've taken me to walk this far already was cut staggeringly short. I tucked my head down past the crook of his neck when the wind became too biting. His hold on me was secure, and I didn't once fear falling off.

A tiny part of me appreciated that I didn't have to do the harsh trek myself, but a greater part grew alarmingly concerned over what would happen once we arrived at our destination.

My body was thoroughly frozen through, my consciousness hanging on by a thread. I still hadn't eaten or drank anything since dinner at the castle, and after trying to flee through the woods, my body had nothing left. My grip kept loosening, making me bob and recover every time it did.

"Are you doing alright back there?" His words drifted along the whipping wind. I intended on responding, but my lips had frozen. That, or I'd lost too much energy to move them. His pace slowed, and the world blurred.

One minute I closed my eyes, clinging to the back of the beast with a weakening grip, and the next, I saw the sky and his chin above me. He peered down. "We're almost there. I'm so sorry, please hang on," he pleaded, each word sounding heavy and urgent. "You're going to be okay. I've got you." A comforting warmth wrapped me tighter, lulling me into oblivion as the sky raced above us.

Next thing I knew, voices mumbled in the distance, but I couldn't hold on to anything long enough to pay attention. A blur of orange painted my vision, and I recognized the feeling of being warm and still, but the moment was short-lived as the darkness pulled me under again.



A loud pop of cinders woke me, and I came to in a darkened room lit by weakening flames. A heavy blanket lay across me, and my head rested on a plush pillow. I inhaled deeply and blinked away the weariness still lingering on my eyelids.

Moonlight streamed through the thin, arched window on the wall behind me, drenching half the room in dull blue light.

Slowly moving my gaze to the other end of the small room, my heart caught in my chest. Bars.

No, no. This is a nightmare. It has to be.

Light painted walls surrounded me, save the stonework of the fireplace, leaving little space to walk between it and the active hearth. The fireplace sat embedded in the same wall as the metal cell door. From what I could tell through the shadowy night, beyond the bars laid a hallway, the details of which were too dark to discern.

Melancholy clawed its way to the forefront of my emotions.

The cycle always continues.

At least I was comfortable and not freezing in the middle of a dangerous forest. I briefly recalled the beast carrying me, the softness of his fur overtop a solid frame. Remembering the warmth and the steady sway as he cradled me in his arms, my eyes turned leaden and I drifted off to sleep.



Beast



Jasper's foot bounced on the ground, elbows locked on his knees, hands propping up his chin. Calista massaged her temples, leaning forward much the same. They'd seen the state of The Coveted when I'd brought her in, and were less than impressed.

"You think the salve will heal it quick?" I asked, mainly to break the silence and have them not be so upset with me. I knew she'd be fine, I hadn't scented any decay on her skin.

Calista sighed. "Yes, I think it was more windburn than frostbite. Which you're lucky about. If you'd marred that girl—"

"I kept close enough to help keep her warm nearly the entire time. Except for when she fled." My arms remained crossed before me. I stood between the sitting chairs in the front room of the manor, facing the coffee table, chesterfield, and the tall window overlooking the front gardens. Moonlight glinted off the steel gate connected to the brick wall that circled half the property.

"You ever push that hard, King?" Jasper asked, the glow of night's silver shining over his bald, stone colored head. "It's not like you to sleep so hard you wouldn't notice her slipping right out of your grasp." His gargoyle wings were pinned tightly behind his back—another tell of his unease and tension.

"No. It was the distance," I admitted. Guilt curled in my stomach like a snake constricting its prey. If I had rested before rushing into Highercrest on arrival, I wouldn't have had to stop with her on the way back. She wouldn't have been exposed to the elements for as long. And maybe I would have been more patient with her.

But time wasn't on our side, and all I could do was hope the girl in the room down the hall was the answer to our problems.

Mira



A lovely symphony of bird song prodded me from sleep. Sunshine drenched the room, drawing warmth from the surrounding cream-colored walls. The fire gave what it could, but the flame was dying down.

It couldn't still have been going from the night, someone must have tended to it. I sat upright, feeling uneasy that a stranger had access to me so easily and I hadn't noticed. There was a slight burning sensation on my cheek, and I raised my fingers to it. An oily residue remained, quenching the heat. It smelled of aloe, and I recognized it was a balm.

Even reaching up to my cheek had been arduous. My muscles were still so stiff. That journey really gave me a beating.

My cloak draped a chair in the far corner. Someone had taken it off me. Lifting the blankets in a swift motion, I checked the rest of my clothing. A sigh of relief escaped me when I realized nothing else had been removed. I allowed my gaze to lazily peruse the space when something on the floor caught my eye.

I leaned over, wincing from the tenderness around my ribs as I did. A pair of navy slippers sat before the fire.

Cozy.

Judging by the sun, I'd probably already slept longer than they would have liked, though I appreciated not being commanded to wake up. Others had been less patient.

“She’s awake!”

I flinched at the sudden declaration, my heart an uncomfortable stone in my chest. When my eyes fell upon the creature at the door, my jaw dropped. I went to speak, but no words came out. His skin rivaled the color of pewter clay. Claw-tipped wings sprouted from his back, and tiny horns sprang from his smooth head.

“Good morning! Calista, open the door,” he hissed his demand to someone out of view down the hall. He cradled a tray in his hands, unable to enter on his own.

A woman with shaggy blonde hair emerged, assisting him with the cell door. The metal keys jingled until the bolt relented with an oppressive thud. She pulled it back, and it swung wide on its hinges. It barely made a sound, making me understand how I hadn't woken before. The two stepped into my small room.

“Here you go. King thought you’d be hungry this morning. I made this for you myself. Man, you sure slept hard.” The gray, winged creature communicated without restraint, as if we’d known each other our whole lives and I wasn’t a captive.

Wait...did he say king of The Cursed Kingdom?

The girl nudged him. “Introduce yourself first, Jasper. Don’t be rude,” she reprimanded in a rushed whisper, balancing a welcoming smile toward me with angered eyes toward him.

“Oh, oh. Sorry about that.” He took a step forward and placed the tray at the end of the bed, then retreated back to the doorway. “I’m Jasper. This is Calista.”

“Hello.” She shot me a lightning fast wave before clasping her hands in front of her again.

I stared at the two chipper individuals staring right back. “H-hi.”

The girl’s smile widened, and she lifted on her toes. Perhaps in more of an anxious way than giddy. “Your cheek is looking better this morning. I left a salve on the chair. You’re welcome to use as much as you like.” She pointed to where my cloak hung, and I noticed the glass jar sitting in the center of the cushion.

She continued, “We’ll leave you to it. The washroom is just down the hall here. We’ll leave the door open for you.” She hooked her hand around the gray creature’s arm as she spun and dragged him out with her.

“Nice meeting you,” he called while trying not to trip over himself as she hauled him away.

What in creation was he? Were they staff of the king? They’d gone through the trouble of installing a cage door, yet they’d left it open.

When their footsteps faded down the hall, I studied the tray they’d brought. Tarnished and scratched silver beheld a plate with a sandwich. The bread looked like an attempt at a croissant that failed miserably. A green leaf of lettuce protruded from

one side, and a strip of meat sat between the bun.

Gone were the days of castle breakfasts, but my grumbling stomach wasn't going to be picky. I'd had worse. I slid the tray closer and picked up the soggy sandwich. Why was it so wet? Didn't matter. I took the largest bite I ever had in my entire life, followed quickly by another, and another, until nothing remained.

With the last bulge of food in my cheek, I chewed thoughtfully while staring at the open cell door. I guzzled down the tall glazed ceramic mug of water on my tray and had to catch my breath afterward.

Using my sleeve, I wiped the corners of my mouth where droplets nearly spilt over. Laughter echoed from down the hall, and my mind returned to the appearance of the creature who'd greeted me. What else existed beyond the borders of Highcrest?

Life had become something so different over the last couple months, and I wondered how it would affect my ability to implement my old strategies. Would I be rusty? Would they even work here? Should I be trying to find a way out instead?

The Coveted's reach had extended into The Cursed Kingdom, with creatures of myth and lore. Their intent would be the same as any, I supposed.

Internally flexing my roleplaying muscles, I closed my eyes and inhaled deeply.

I can do this. I've done it one hundred times before. They expect The Coveted to bless them with their desires. Keep meek and reserved. Who knows how long it will take for anyone else to find me here. Bide my time, that's all I need to do.

I finally rose from the bed when my bladder started aching. My muscles screamed in a new, unforgiving way. I hoped I wouldn't have to endure travel like that again.

The slippers looked too comfortable to pass up, so I slid them on. I shook my head, straightened my posture, and walked determinedly out of the room.

Glancing in both directions, I caught my first glimpses of this residence. It was spacious, but not nearly enough to be a castle. Much cozier, though. Red runners faded with time lined the hallway. Mahogany wood spanned the opposite wall, wooden embellishments stretching across the middle.

Tarnished brass candelabras decorated the table against the wall with matching framed portraits of flowers overtop. A skylight provided natural light in the hall, though not much since snow eclipsed the base of the pane by about a foot, and the cloud covered sky dulled the sun.

Those two had gone right, and the hall to the left led elsewhere around a corner. For a moment, I contemplated. To the right brought me to my new captors, but left...

I moved. My slippered feet took delicate steps over the worn red carpet, stealthy and silent. When I walked a few feet to the corner, I peered around. Another hall, similar to this one, but it had two sets of double doors. Straight ahead was a dead end. Another skylight highlighted the forsaken looking hall.

When the echo of jovial laughter reached my ears, it lit a fire under my feet. Suddenly I was brought back to that version of myself that dared to sneak around the castle halls. Past Mira would have been obedient, freely sacrificing opportunities in the name of safety.

The wiser part of me knew I should try harder to slip back into that facade that'd provided me safety all these years. But this new part, this bolder part, knew gathering information was vital.

Deciding between the mystery doors, I finally settled on the set to my left. The flat of my palm dragged against the smooth lacquered wood until it fell on the cold brass handle. Pressing my ear against the door, I turned the knob when silence confirmed the room was most likely empty.

Ever so slowly, I pushed until crowded bookshelves lining the wall came into view. A breathy laugh rushed out of my lungs. The back of the room was essentially one giant arched window, with grilles designing a dawning sun above the grided pane. A wintery garden landscape laid beyond the wavy glass, reflecting the brightness of the snow upon this private study.

A sturdy desk faced the doors with a worn brown leather chair tucked behind. Cobwebs spread over a quill in its holder, and ledgers and papers laid askew, with a thin layer of dust covering the desk's surface.

A ladder made from raw, uneven timber rested against the shelves to my right, also covered in cobwebs. I neared, skimming one of the spines with the tip of my forefinger. It made a streak in the dust, and my finger and thumb rolled together to clear the aged residue.

The wall opposite held an identical bookcase, though more trinkets adorned that one. As I beheld the space, drinking in the sight of all these stories ready to be consumed, my vision stalled on a book at the top of the stack on the desk. I hadn't noticed before, but it stood out for its lack of dust.

Furrowing my brow in curiosity, I went to step forward, but the voices down the hall grew louder. I didn't want to get caught, it might lead to heavier supervision.

"I'll come back for you," I whispered to the books, my gaze bidding a loving farewell.

Exiting the office quietly, I closed the door, careful not to let the click of the knob ring too loud. My slippered steps carried me back the way I came. Aged damask patterned wallpaper covered the wall that held the cage to my room. Once I passed my room, a large silhouette emerged at the end of the hall.

The beast.

Startled, I froze. He barely fit in this hallway, the tips of his ears nearly grazing the ceiling. His shoulders rose and fell, as if angry, determined. I could hear his snarling huffs despite him being an awkward distance away.

I tried to process the array of conflicting feelings that washed over me at the sight of him. Were we on friendly terms? He'd accommodated my travel after I'd asked, carrying me on his back to get here. I'd awoken safe in a warm bed.

Then again, *he'd brought me here*. Stole me from the royal gardens, and put me through hell in that frozen forest. Then again, he did save me from being an ogre's breakfast. To what end, though?

Our standoff continued, neither one of us saying a word. I didn't know if I'd see him again. It finally broke when the girl from earlier squeezed past his broad frame, shoving his thigh out of her way.

"See! I told you, she's fine! Poor girl needed to eat something first," she said to the beast. "I've run you a hot bath. King told me you had a rough journey. This'll help. I've put some magnesium salts in there. Come, this way." She ushered me over with the wave of her hand. I noted the lack of demand in her voice.

King? No, I must have misheard. The beast's body relaxed, his tense shoulders finally easing as he stepped out of her way.

A hot bath did sound absolutely wonderful, and my muscles cramped, beckoning for the relief the moment she mentioned the journey. Sneaking around had momentarily distracted me from my lingering aches. I started toward them, dropping my face to the ground.

Play my role.

The girl with shaggy blonde hair, Calista, smiled and audibly shooed the beast, gesturing with her hands for him to make more room for me to pass. He turned to the side, pressing his back against the wallpaper.

I couldn't help but draw my stare to his as I passed. I had to tip my head back to capture his gaze in the confined hallway. His eyes looked less animalistic than before, though I hadn't really gotten a good look during our travel.

Caramel brown eyes stared at me with such bare intensity, I worried for a moment that he peered into my very soul. That he might sniff out the games I was about to play. Hastily, I averted my gaze.

Strangely, any fear around him had nearly vanished. A day ago, I'd imagined those sharp ended claws digging into my flesh. Those pointed teeth severing my neck. But he'd never attacked me, nor did he threaten to.

And seeing this comparably small woman order him around without an ounce of trepidation seemed...odd. I needed to watch carefully, to assess.

The foyer encasing the front door was at the end of the hall. Calista stood around the corner to the left, a smile on her face as she nodded to the open door beside her.

"Here you go. I'll leave you to it."

Hands clasped before me, I nodded as I passed her. Stepping into the dimly lit bathroom, forest green paint hugged the walls. Blue and white checkered tile surrounded the free standing porcelain tub. A much smaller room than my personal bathroom at the castle, but infinitely better than Clint's bucket.

"If you need anything, just holler. Take as much time as you need." Her smile felt like a comforting hand on my shoulder before closing the door, leaving me in private.

A small tub nestled in the corner took up almost the entire room. After relieving myself, I stripped and sunk into the steamy water. Heat wrapped my muscles like velvet. I tilted my head back, resting against the rim of the porcelain. My muscles sighed in relief, and I along with them.

Baths at the castle had become one of my favorite activities, and I reminisced about the scent of oranges and lavender.

I pinched my lips together, tears stinging my eyes.

The blessing would always win. Always dictate my life. I shut my eyes, forcing out a single tear. Inhaling deeply and puffing my cheeks, I submerged my entire head under the water.

A steady stream of bubbles left my lips, floating to the surface. The water helped calm my building emotions, the closest thing to a protective shield I could have around myself, shutting out the world and its expectations.

I screamed, letting the water silence the cry that ripped from my throat.

I'd spend hours under the glassy surface if I could, but my chest felt like it was caving in, calling an end to my temporary sanctuary. I thrust upward, sucking down a gulp of air before sweeping my fingers over my eyes.

Back above water, I resigned myself to my fate. There would be no running from it—I'd learned that a long time ago. But I could do this. Play the role the gods wanted me to play.

Sure, I was in a foreign land with creatures I had no idea existed, unaware of their intentions for me or what they knew of my reputation, but the formula was the same. Their wants and desires, plus my magic, equaled their dreams coming true.

Dancing along the edges of my mind was the possibility that I would be here for a while. After all, who would know The Coveted was in this kingdom? But if a prince's castle couldn't secure me, with an entire army at his disposal, then these creatures didn't stand a chance.

Maybe some of those books would hold information that would prove useful. Perhaps I'd figure out where in the kingdom I was, how close I was to Highcrest. I released a bitter, mocking laugh.

Like I'd ever have the courage to run.

Bide my time, that's all I had to do.

Beast

EARLIER THAT DAY

I may have been exhausted last night when I'd brought her back, but I still rose when the sun did. That instinct was a living thing in the blood of an animal.

Alone in the forest, I couldn't stop my thoughts from circulating. Breaching Highcrest had been a risk, a great one, but I'd had to try. Shame threatened to burn me from the inside out if it weren't for the opportunity to redeem myself in the slightest. If it hadn't been for Calista's crystal ball, I would have been flying blind into a kingdom that wouldn't tolerate my presence.

For good reason.

Their patrols had grown lax since the last time, which also helped aid my mission. Without knowledge of an entire civilization beyond the cursed lines of the land, there wasn't much to protect against, I guess. Not that any of our people here would return across the border if they had a choice. Not with physical markings of magic. Only a few could shield their inhuman features, and without that protection, fear of persecution remained too high.

Hard to forget a great slaughter that pushed your family lines back into a barely hospitable land. It had been about a century since dark magic had ravaged the kingdom, and yet I swore I could still smell the distinct sour scent of hate toward magic wielders.

My own memories solidified that lingering resentment as well.

Anonymous played to our strengths, though. Can't hunt magic wielders if you don't know they exist. There'd be no way the two neighboring kingdoms would leave powerful creatures such as myself unchecked, let alone an entire society of the magically blessed.

But since the decay had been spreading, it seemed that timeline of obscurity would be coming to an end. Hence why drastic measures needed to be taken. When Prince Nick got his greedy hands on a girl blessed by the very magic they claimed to fear, we saw an opportunity. Hard to believe the idea started as a passing joke from Jasper, of all creatures.

"If anyone deserves her magic, it's us! After all, one of our own gave it to her. All magical creatures should return here, and we should cast a bubble around us. No magic outside of it. Only the cool kids inside get access."

"We could call ourselves The Bubble Kingdom, and its residents, The Bubblers." He pursed his lips, folding his arms over his puffed chest, like what he'd said wasn't ridiculous. *"What'd ya say, King? Would you walk the bubble perimeter? Surely, none of those cowering humans would dare mess with the great beast."* He raised his arms wide, mimicking my tall stature and lumbering gait.

Then inspiration struck. "You're right, Jas. The magic should belong to us. They already have everything they need. We're the ones who need it most," I said in contemplation.

"Yeah. We need the bubble." He reinforced his absurd notion.

"No." I raised my paw and shook my head. *"Not a bubble. We need the girl."*

I sat among the thickets, steady my breath, ears in tune with animalistic precision to any and all movement. I'd been here for hours, unmoving from my position, as rooted as the charred, ancient trees around me. This tactic differed from my usual, but with all the energy I'd expended yesterday getting her here, and the day previous to get to her, I didn't have it in me to trounce through these woods until I tracked down a stag.

The scent of brambleberries wafted to me, making my stomach churn. Abundance of anything was scarce, but not these berries in the winter. Calista had already baked dozens of pies with them this season, enough that the smell alone was grating.

A cracking snap in the distance caught my attention. My predatory eyes targeted the lone stag. The upper right of my snout curled up into a smile before I lunged from the bush. A benefit of being a beast born from magic was the unmatched power in

my veins, superior to that of natural born creatures.

The stag took off in an attempt to escape me, galloping and weaving through the charcoal trees, leaving a scent of panic trailing behind. All four of my paws pounded the snowy ground with every powerful lunge forward.

Once I caught up, I pounced, tackling it to the ground, sending a rumble through the trees. As an act of mercy, my palms grasped either side of its head, and twisted with such speed that it wouldn't have felt a thing. Rearing on my haunches, I let myself catch my breath, the air clouding before me on every exhale.

This would feed us and a few families in the village for most of the week. I dropped my gaze down to the glossy, motionless eyes of the creature.

“Sorry, buddy.” Rising to my full height, I threw the girthy stag over my shoulders. I tried not to dally on my return home.

The manor stood tall against the bleak, wintery skyline. Our spacious backyard held a few sets of our footprints in determined paths, either to the chicken coup and firewood to the left, or trailing toward the front or the forest behind me.

Hiking the incline, I was aware of each bush that remained hidden under the blanket of snow, and the sizable pond that contained the fish Jasper liked to feed in warmer months. At this rate, I wondered if we'd survive to see the snow melt.

I approached the backdoor that led to the kitchen. Squeezing through the oversized frame, I tried maneuvering myself and the giant antlered stag. It caught several times, requiring me to step back and attempt different angles.

Eventually, and with more frustration than I cared to admit, I forced us both through and slammed the lifeless body onto the butcher's block island.

“No, no, don't worry about keeping the noise down. It's not like anyone in this house needs sleep.” Calista yawned and wiped her heavy eyes as she entered the kitchen, wrapped in her purple robe. “I wondered if you were doing construction down here. Sounded like you were trying to take out the back wall.”

I didn't bring up the new gouges in the door frame from my repeated, frustrated efforts. “How does a nap after a full belly sound?” My cocky tone made her snicker as she settled her eyes on the island.

“Gods, do you know how long this is going to take to drain?” She grabbed a blood bucket from one of the open faced shelves in the kitchen, all enjoyment stamped out by the size of the task ahead.

“Nothing gets wasted. You know that.” My paws rested on the creature, gaze raking over its considerable size from snout to tail.

“Can't the ogres just melt snow or drink from the lake like the rest of us?” She pursed her lips at the smell that clung to the stained metal. She grabbed a wooden stool along with a second bucket, and positioned herself at the beast's head, bucket extended, ready for the routine.

I stretched a sharp claw, rearing back the head by the antler, and swiped along its fleshy neck. A stream of crimson shot out. Practice let her know exactly the angle and distance she needed to hold it to avoid a mess.

“This way, there's more meat for all of us. You know that,” I finally replied, knowing perfectly well she knew.

“Doesn't mean I have to like it.” Her lip snagged in the corner, her fair face still puffy from sleep.

I huffed a laugh through my snout. “Sorry to start your day off with it.”

“Well, at least this way I can get it over with. Something tells me my attention is going to be occupied today.” She was referencing our new houseguest.

The Coveted. The redheaded woman that was currently recovering in the old maid's bedroom.

I'd scented her in that garden before I'd breached the wall. Feminine, light. Lovely, even against the bitter winter chill. Upon seeing her face, I learned that her beauty matched. Watching her jump in the snow with carefree wonder did something to my heart. Then she'd looked at me, and the fear that'd struck her...

Releasing a grunt, I adjusted my grip on the antler, but it slipped from my grasp. The snout fell, smacking Calista on the top of the head, forcing her to bend beneath its hefty weight.

“Ow!” she called out. The bucket jerked and spilled a wave of crimson on the floor. Her quick reflexes saved most of it, and she brought one of her hands to her head.

“Shit!” I recovered my hold, hoisting it back up. “You okay?”

“Are you fucking kidding me, King?!”

“I'm sorry, it slipped.” That hit couldn't have been gentle, and guilt pried my chest in half. I'd lost focus.

“What's all the commotion about?” Jasper entered the kitchen, groaning out his question as he stretched his arms high above his head in a languid motion, expanding his wings when he stepped through the kitchen doorway. I was glad to see he'd taken the situation seriously by rising so early.

“King fucking beat me up with a moose.” Calista grumbled, still palming the top of her head.

“HA!” Jasper released a hearty laugh, folding over to rest his hands on his knees. “Wolf DNA not enough for ya? You had to get a moose to fight on your behalf?”

“It's a stag,” I corrected, defeatedly.

“Oh, just a stag. Come on, Cal, I don't know what you're complaining about. It's just a stag!” he jeered, opening his arms out to his sides before rounding the table and pressing a kiss to her wounded head.

Calista chortled, tension still spread across her forehead as she held her head. "Here, take over bucket duty," she ordered Jasper.

They switched positions with ease. Calista waltzed out of the kitchen, not feigning even a glance in my direction.

"Sorry, Calista," I called after her.

She waved her arm in the air before walking down the hall and out of sight.

"You know you're going to pay for that, right?" Jasper looked up at me from under his brow while he caught the still flowing blood into the bucket.

I sighed, pinching the bridge of my nose with my claws. "Yeah. It was an accident, though."

"Hey, I'm not arguing with you." He threw one of his hands up. "Wouldn't want to get a moose dropped on my head."

I rolled my eyes, cocking my head back.

"*It's a stag,*" we said in unison. Maybe I'd lived here too long.

We both chuckled.

Once the blood had been drained, I left for the markets. Though, I found myself wanting to stay behind. I'd put that girl through hell on the journey here, the guilt no less potent with the dawn of a new day. But she'd still been resting when I'd checked on her, and I had business to see to.

The mid-morning sun filtered through the quiet, snow-laden trees. In the distance, the market bustled, the scent of freshly baked breads wafting through the crisp winter air.

Within a few minutes, I entered the crowd. Some vendors nodded at me, the ones who'd remained fed by my hand, while others actively worked to clear from my path. A common response, one that hit me with a fresh wave of regret every time it did. Easily the biggest creature here, I was easy to spot. My intimidating size did nothing to hedge their fear. Their judgment.

"Fresh fowl! Fresh fowl for sale!" a witch called out, holding a couple dead ducks by their feet. A line formed quickly, long enough to know not everyone would leave with a meal.

Conversations carried through the constant stream of people and creatures. Clanging coins, knives on butcher blocks, and the sound of heated haggling rose to my ears. The market hadn't been this full in a while, and I couldn't yet determine if that was a good or bad indicator.

A tiny hand wrapped around my wrist, yanking my attention downward.

"Didn't think I'd be seeing you today." That angelic voice brought instantaneous comfort. Evenita's silver hair shimmered with every touch of streaming light through the trees.

"I caught a stag this morning. A big one."

"Oh, well that's very fortunate for you," she cooed.

"And for some others I know," I teased.

She patted my arm, glancing at me with a knowing smile. "Is that why your countenance today seems...brighter?" Her stare trailed over me from head to toe, that smile remaining.

"Brighter, huh?" I countered, furrowing my brow with a tilted glance.

"I've known you for a long time now, *King*," she mocked the nickname, squeezing her grip on my arm. "Something's happening in your life."

Yeah, I'm kidnapping women these days.

We walked side by side. I'd slowed my pace for her elderly frame to keep up. Chewing on the idea of whether or not I should reveal my plan, I halted, bending down to speak closer.

"I'm hoping to fix things around here. That's all you need to know for now." I scanned the crowd for any who might have overheard.

"For others? Or for you?"

If fur didn't cover every inch of my skin, I would've stood out like a beacon with the blazing heat spreading across it. I'd also have taken offense if this woman didn't smile so damn sweetly while tossing that loaded question at me like an explosive.

Evenita always seemed to be able to read my soul, like it was in plain writing, a book with every inner thought or emotion I'd ever felt.

Whether that was from a lifetime of observance, or magic, I didn't know. Her abilities with spell casting were top tier, though. I'd experienced *that* firsthand.

"You consider ten years long?" I tossed out the jab, a desperate and obvious attempt to thwart her pervasive intuition.

Her smile stretched wider, though she scolded me with a piercing glare and smacked my bicep.

The skin creased around her eyes. I wondered how many years she'd been around. For a woman whom I considered one of my closest friends, she had a masterful way of not sharing much information about herself.

"You're allowed to think about yourself, you know." Her words might as well have been in the form of a newly sharpened blade, they sliced into me all the same.

I rose from my crouched position, needing to put space between us. "I'll bring you your delivery once it's prepped." My paw gently rested on her shoulder for a moment before I peeled myself away, pushing into the crowd. I swallowed the lump in my

throat.

I wasted no time seeking the families I'd share the stag with and informed them of the impending delivery. Then I left to return to the manor.

A war waged inside me, my thudding steps beating like the call of war drums, but I refused to acknowledge it. The only thing that mattered was figuring out how to use the girl's magic to counteract the spreading disease that robbed the kingdom of food resources.

This girl was the key to saving the kingdom. And possibly more. The gravity of it was becoming all-consuming. I shook my head, pinning back my ears. Those thoughts had no place right now.

I made my way into the manor through the front door, finding Jasper and Calista laughing over their board game in the parlor to the left.

"Ay, you're back!" Jasper turned his attention to me, carrying his entertained grin with him.

"Have either of you checked on the girl? Is she awake yet?" My claws dug into my furry palms, trying to forget the memory of her limp body in my paws.

"She is. We left her with some breakfast and gave her some privacy. She seemed a little shocked at seeing *this* one." Calista bounced her eyebrows in Jasper's direction.

"Yeah, shocked at how handsome I am." He flexed his biceps.

"Riiight." Calista squinted her gaze at him.

He smirked and shrugged off her questioning tone, his pride as strong as his stone-like skin.

"We left her door open. She should be joining us soon," Calista added, making another move with her piece on the board.

"You WHAT?" My lip furled in anger, exposing my elongated canines. We'd installed that cage door with its lock for a reason, and I already knew she was a runner.

"She's fine, don't worry." Calista attempted to subdue my rising fury, but it didn't work.

Panic churned in my gut, the same terror as I'd experienced waking in the woods to nothing but her footprints trailing into the forest. We didn't know how her magic worked, and Calista had seen images of caged doors and locks adorning her rooms. She'd been under full castle guard for gods' sake. She was potentially volatile, and they'd left her unsupervised.

If we lost her, we'd lose everything.

I back tracked into the hallway. The moment I emerged into it, I saw her standing there.

Vermillion waves cascaded past her shoulders, and she froze in place when our gazes connected. The sight of her drew and quartered my thoughts. I hadn't seen her in the daylight without being covered by the dark wool cloak she'd worn.

Even from a distance, my animalistic senses looked over her with precise detail. Her soft, light skin added to the vibrancy of her hair, and the corset she had on hugged her gentle curves so intimately. My breath hitched.

"See, I told you, she's fine! Poor girl needed to eat something first," Calista nudged passed in the narrow hall.

Maybe I had overreacted, but we couldn't be too careful. This girl meant everything and unknowingly held our future in her delicate grasp.



Beast



“Well you quit pacing?! She’s not going anywhere. Unless there’s a secret way out from the bathroom. And there isn’t, I would know. It is *my* manor, after all,” Jasper said as I came close to making the carpet smoke from the relentless friction of my paws.

“She’s just enjoying the bath, King. You brought the girl here in rough shape,” Calista added.

My glare threatened them both as much as bearing my razor-sharp teeth would. I didn’t need a reminder. Calista rolled her eyes. They’d been around me long enough that anything beastly about me rolled off their shoulders.

It served as a comfort *and* frustration, to be honest. What was the benefit of looking this way if I couldn’t wield a little intimidation?

“You can’t leave her unsupervised,” I growled.

They adjusted in their seats, all of us uncomfortable with the current circumstance.

“So what’s the play here, King? Are we going to tell her what we need her to do?” Jasper asked from the sofa by the window.

Crossing my arms in thought, I leaned against the wall. “I don’t know how her blessing works. As far as I’m aware, she’s not a witch, so it’s not like she casts spells. Rumors say that simply having her in your possession grants your desires.”

Calista passed a glance between us before chiming in. “Well then, we’ll ask her.”

I huffed a sarcastic laugh. “I just kidnapped the girl from a castle. I doubt she’ll be willing to participate in friendly conversation. She’s already tried escaping if you don’t recall. Besides, we can’t risk her deciding not to help if she can put a stop to her magic.”

“How long do you expect to have her with us? If word spreads about her being here, that could invite more trouble,” Jasper said.

“So, should we just take her to Witches Pass? Closer proximity? It’s clear she doesn’t want to be here, and I thought I could get on board, but....” Calista ran her fingers through her hair, tossing the uneven tresses around.

Something about that plan didn’t feel right. I hadn’t even seen the conditions there firsthand myself. Jasper had scoped it out a couple weeks back, and just took Alaina there to test her power. “Bringing her here was hard enough on her. I don’t want to push her too hard and kill her in the process. We need her.” *I need her.*

“It’s probably the best play, King,” Jasper resigned, opening his palms to me. He could sense my apprehension, but weighed the options.

“She’s not leaving this manor, and that’s final,” I snapped, thrusting off the wall with my foot and storming down the hall, rattling the portraits on the walls in my wake.

I agreed with Calista. This plan had seemed easier before I beheld the girl. But what if we brought her to the curse, and she fixed it right away? I couldn’t convince them to keep her after that, and I needed just a little time...

I pinched the bridge of my snout with my claw-tipped fingers, leaning against the study door.

The war inside continued to rage. A battle against who I wanted to be, and who I was.

And in the middle of the battlefield stood a red-headed beauty caught in the crossfire.

Mira

I rose from the rapidly cooling bath, letting the water run off my body and splash back down. I pulled the plug from the drain and stepped out.

I couldn't hide in here forever.

A ratty towel lay folded on the floor, and I picked it up, dabbing myself off before scrunching it in my hair. I grimaced when I didn't see fresh new clothes laid out for me. I supposed I'd come to expect lavish treatment, and the cruel reminder of weeks in captivity in the same dirty clothes rushed to the forefront of my mind.

I'd drenched myself with sweat in what I'd worn running in those woods. It only took a split second for the opportunity to present itself for me to act. I tossed my fashionable dress and slip into the slowly lowering water. My hands massaged the fabric against itself, and I grabbed an old bar of soap that I'd actively avoided using up until this point.

I worked fast, targeting all the major problem areas and lathering. The timing turned out perfectly. As I rinsed the last article of clothing, the porcelain revealed itself bare. I wrung the excess water, then laid the freshly washed garments along the lip of the tub.

A satisfied smile spread across my face as I rested my hands on my hips and admired my handiwork. If I were to be kept in that jail cell room for who knew how long, at least I'd have clean clothes. I plucked the towel off the floor and wrapped it around my body. Gathering my hair, I brought it over my shoulder, so the worn cotton could catch the ends that still dripped.

A startling knock pounded on the door, and I jumped where I stood.

“Are you alright in there?” I recognized the voice of the gray creature as his shadowed feet stepped in front of the door.

“Yes. I was just washing my clothes,” I admitted, staring at the sodden outfit, hoping that would ease any irritation that I'd taken so long.

What's the plan now? Sit in this bathroom for the next three hours while these clothes air dry? Maybe I hadn't thought it through entirely.

“Oh shit,” he muttered. “Let me...let me see what I can get. Hold on.”

His shadows departed. He started a conversation with the woman, Calista, but I couldn't hear the exchange clearly. Footsteps tapped down the hall afterward. My skin prickled against the cool air. I fought the shiver, working my hands up and down my arms.

A minute or two passed, and this time she was the one who came to the door. “Hey, I grabbed you some of my clothes. They're not as fancy as yours, but we look about the same size, so I think they'll fit. I'll just leave them here. You can take them when you're ready,” she said beyond the wood.

The thought of anyone thinking my clothing was fancy pulled a lopsided smirk out of me. Granted, they weren't actually mine, but these new captors wouldn't know that.

I waited a moment after hearing her footsteps fade down the hall, then timidly opened the bathroom door. Daylight from the windows poured across the wood floor. If anyone walked by outside, I would be in plain view, since the windows sat from my waist to the ceiling. With haste, I snatched the clothes and barricaded myself back in the small bathroom.

The clothes she'd brought me were very much worn. Threads frayed near some of the seams, but I smelled them, and confirmed they were clean. I might have waited the three hours if they hadn't been.

Perhaps the castle *had* pampered me too much. I'd been in far worse conditions than day old sweaty clothes.

The thought of returning to that life made my skin crawl, a reminder of the trauma that'd been strung together to create my life. But I needed to act unbothered. Things could become much worse if I didn't play my cards right.

Straightening my spine and setting my shoulders back, I readied myself. Clean and dressed, I opened the bathroom door, no longer hidden in the safety of the four confining walls. The sun raining through the uneven glass showered me in light, and I shuffled down the hall in my slippers. They were already growing on me.

The hallway opened into a sitting room, where the two faces I'd met this morning lit up in greeting when they saw me.

"Come, sit," Calista offered, gesturing toward a well loved burgundy chair near the roaring blaze of the fireplace.

Immediately to my left was the foyer. The front door. Freedom.

I balled my fists, internally reprimanding myself. What awaited out there in The Cursed Kingdom was surely far worse than what lay before me.

Dipping my chin slightly, I kept my gaze locked on the ground as I wrung my hands and padded in and took a seat.

"I hope the bath was nice. And the food?" Calista said, her words hanging in the air, waiting for my response.

I nodded, trying to keep my gaze averted, but...my senses were off in this new place, making it difficult to trust the tactics I'd known. I briefly glanced through the window, scoping my surroundings. Nothing but barren winter lands and stripped, blackened trees sprawled into view.

I must be deep in the woods.

"See, not everyone thinks I'm a terrible cook," Jasper said, tossing a smirky glare at Calista.

"I don't know, I didn't hear a verbal confirmation. I told you it looked too soggy. You shouldn't have wet the lettuce," Calista said.

"It's called *washing*, Calista," he replied, but with no real offense. "Where are our manners? We haven't even asked the poor girl her name yet!"

They shared a look between them when only my silence responded. I debated actually answering, because this was becoming increasingly awkward.

"That's alright," Calista chimed in. "Whenever you're ready. I know this must be a little jarring for you."

Sarcasm huffed out of my lips before I had a chance to stop it. "A *little*."

Jasper snorted a laugh. Heat blossomed on my cheeks, and I shoved my stare into my lap.

"Yeah, actually, this must fucking suck." Calista tangled her fingers in her hair, shaking it about as she outwardly contemplated my situation.

"Oh, Cal, she's not from here." Jasper sat up straight, aiming all his focus at her with widened eyes.

She gave him a judgmental squint. "You really are a genius, you know that?"

"No, I mean, she's not used to seeing creatures like me and King before."

Their king. The beast. I had heard her right before.

"Oh, that's right. Sorry to greet you with this ugly mug this morning." Calista pointed her thumb toward Jasper.

"Hey!"

"Must have been startling," she continued, unfazed by his offense.

"Unbelievable," Jasper said, shaking his head at her.

A smile managed to flash across my lips, though. Calista caught it and wore a smirk of triumph.

His deep baritone voice rumbled out of his chest. "More like *you're welcome* for starting your day off in the presence of such beauty." Jasper placed the back of his hand to his forehead, like a swooning maiden.

Absurd. This was all completely absurd. I couldn't stop the abrupt laugh that sputtered through my lips.

"Ay, look at that. She laughs!" Jasper shrugged his shoulders in a *who knew* fashion at Calista.

"If you're hungry at all, just let us know. King went out and got us some fresh meat today, so we've got plenty to spare. Also, there's some brambleberry pie," Calista encouraged.

Jasper gagged, placing a closed fist over his mouth.

"Ignore him," she sneered in his direction. "It's delicious, but we've just eaten so much of it lately."

"If I never see another brambleberry in my life, it'll be too soon."

"Bet you wouldn't say that to Hu," Calista said, folding her arms before her as she reclined in her chair.

"Hey, Hu makes brambleberry tarts. Totally different."

A moment of silence passed between them, Calista's brow raising pointedly.

"...Of course I wouldn't tell him no!" Jasper tossed his hands up in defeat.

"Mhm," Calista hummed.

Was Hu someone else I should expect to meet? I wouldn't ask.

"We were just in the middle of an epic marathon of Druids & Horseshoes. It's a game we invented." Jasper splayed his hand, referencing the game board and pieces that laid askew on the coffee table between where he and Calista sat.

She leaned forward on the edge of her chair, the match to the one I currently sat in. He edged forward on the sofa. Both of their attentions turned back to the game.

"We're almost done this round," Calista said, eyes fixed on the random collection of trinkets used as game pieces.

"You mean you're almost done *losing* this game," Jasper retorted, a smug grin lining his not-quite-human face.

Calista rolled her eyes before moving one of her pieces on the board. A thimble, a tiny, ratty pin cushion with a few stray pins, an old key, and some other knick-knacks sat in random places across the surface.

Calista picked up two dice and shook them in her hand before letting them loose on the table. She counted the dots and

moved a king pawn from a chessboard the appropriate amount of spaces.

“Ha! Fall back to the river, and tread water for two turns,” Calista gloated.

“Shit!” Jasper defeatedly grabbed his silver coin piece, and followed the flow of a curvy line etched on the board I didn’t see before, a bridge with waves around it. “That was literally the ONE move that would delay my inevitable victory, but it’s fine. It will just make my win that much more triumphant.”

“You keep telling yourself that,” Calista mused, passing the pair of dice to him.

Remaining silent had been a decision, but I realized it wasn’t the only reason. I’d never been around people acting so... casually. At the castle, I’d been around performance and politics, politeness and preferential treatment. Adalene had relaxed a little around me, but still kept a professional demeanor.

Calista and Jasper’s relationship, however, presented a raw quality. Something honest and real. Two people, so comfortable and used to each other that their relationship moved like a dance. No pretenses, no expectations.

I didn’t know how I would even begin to play my role in a setting like this. So casual and informal. As I sat in their midst, not gawked at like something to worship, I wouldn’t even know what to say.

Whatever game they were playing by bringing me here didn’t seem to have an element of deception or malice—unless they were just *really* good at hiding it.

After a few more turns, and colorful commentary, I noted the lack of tension in my shoulders. So much so, I didn’t hold any reservations when the question came to mind. “Why am I here?” Maybe the rumors they’d heard had been misinterpreted. I had to know what they knew of me, and they seemed like the types to spill that information.

My question cut through the room like a guillotine. Jasper and Calista froze their game play, laughter ceasing, drawing glances between themselves and me. Suddenly, the crackling fireplace tucked behind my chair sounded like booming cannons, everyone becoming deathly silent.

“Um,” Calista forced out the word, evidently not having anything to follow up with.

“We should let King take the lead on that,” Jasper said, mostly to Calista, who nodded in agreement. Jasper clapped his hands on his bare thighs. How he wore shorts in the dead of winter, I didn’t understand. “Sorry that your trip here was, ah... difficult. He didn’t mean it.” Jasper wrinkled his forehead.

I straightened a little from my somewhat slumped demeanor. He’d spoken to them about it. *Huh, remorse from a beast.*

I couldn’t let that influence me. I’d been stolen from a castle, put through terrible conditions in the woods, and was currently no doubt being held captive to be used for my perceived powers. The fact they weren’t revealing why I’d been brought here further cemented their nefarious intent. I slumped into the high-back chair, resting against the deep red velvet as they resumed their game play.

I glanced out the window, staring into the bleak winter of a cursed forest, fighting off the dark thoughts that conjured scenarios that were sure to come for me, eventually.

Beast



I gently cracked open the spine, tenderly turning over the fragile, aged pages inside. No matter how many times I flipped through this book, I never became less careful. A compiled collection from a poet, reimagining war time letters from soldiers to loved ones back home.

As much as I held gratitude for my relationships with Calista and Jasper, certain connections couldn't be replicated. Not now. Not for me. Reading inked words that placed me in the shoes of men I'd never have a chance to become stirred restless emotions in my soul. Someone's *beloved* son, brother. Lover.

Within these lines, I could pretend.

Bella,
An ocean divides us, but my heart knows not the distance.
I see you in the morning sun.
You call new light to the darkest of nights.
Before my eyes pry open from sleep,
I feel you here beside me.
You are the entire world.
Yours,
Adam

I scanned the passage I didn't have to see to recite, allowing the familiar words to coil around my heart in a steady embrace. I closed my eyes tightly, forcing myself to breathe to keep the emotions at bay. Moments like this, in the quiet study, were all the reprieve I had from the demands of the world. I'd taken on a mantle that I'd thought I could carry. Arrogance, maybe. Desperation, absolutely.

Snapping the book shut, I returned it to the pile on the desk. My ears focused, picking up on conversation drifting through the manor. Jasper conceding to Calista over something. A small smile twitched on my canine lips. At least they were in it with me, this mission to save the kingdom. How I'd managed to find friends this accepting after all those years, after what I'd done...

Hasty strides carried me out of the study and down the hall toward the parlor. Scents floated down the hallway to greet me before I saw them. Calista and her smoky sage, then something light and lovely. I stepped into view, and that vibrant red hair called my attention. Her gaze gently rolled up to mine, and she straightened in her seat.

Those dazzling green eyes locked onto me for only a second. A heartbeat. Yet when they fell away, a strange tug nipped at my chest. She looked...submissive. Unsure. Her sadness painted the air. Her damp curls rested over one shoulder, making her look like she belonged on a painting. The elegant curve of her exposed neck balanced the sweetness of the gathered hair on the other with a siren song of temptation.

I wanted to ask how she was feeling. If the bed was comfortable. If she'd had enough to eat. If she was scared...

The claws on my toes sunk into the wood floor, piercing the grain. Calista's outburst drew my attention. She'd tossed her arms high in the air, shouting her victory.

“A-ha! Suck it!” She pointed a finger in Jasper’s direction.

“Oh, come on! I almost had you!” Jasper reclined, slumping into his wings against the back cushions on the sofa, letting his hands fall to his sides in defeat.

“You did. I was actually worried. But let’s face it, it’s best that I won. You would have been *unbearable* after a comeback like that.”

“It was impressive how close I got though.” Jasper’s grin curved to one side while he wagged his hairless eyebrows at her. Calista released a drawn-out groan. “You’re incorrigible.”

“Hey King,” Jasper greeted, noticing me in the doorway.

The girl’s sadness almost expunged the reason I’d come back, her sorrow so palpable I wanted to pick it up in my hands and take it far away. “We need to prepare the stag. You two, to the kitchen.” I glanced between Calista and Jasper before letting myself stare at her again. “You need to return to your room.” My gaze fell, heavy with shame.

Jasper and Calista exchanged a glare, but they got up without protest and headed toward the back of the manor. The girl rose to her feet, obediently following instruction. I found myself wishing to hear her voice and did my best to refrain from deeply inhaling her sweet scent as she passed.

The key to her room laid on the game board, and I stalked over, snatching it. I followed the girl back to her room, disgrace churning in my gut when I gripped onto the metal door and swung it closed. I fit the key inside. She simply sat herself on the bed, not a hint of protest at my action. Used to it, I supposed. After all, we’d installed the cell door only because we’d seen it done with her previous captor. A few months ago, when Calista traveled into a small town in Highcrest for supplies, she’d heard rumor of The Coveted when the locals gossiped about a break in at the worship hall.

Since then, Calista had been using her seer abilities to locate the girl. But with images of her behind bars in a near windowless cabin, we’d had no identifying tells of where she was located.

Still, the thud resounded, pounding on that organ in my chest for the actions I was taking. The man I was becoming, while trying to become the opposite.

With the door locked, I left, unable to look her in the eyes before I proceeded to the kitchen.

Jasper spoke when I came through the doorway. “You wanna tell us what that was about?”

They made quick work to skin the animal, both sets of eyes awaiting my reply. “We have work to do, and I didn’t think bringing her around these sharp knives was a good idea,” I stated coolly, as if the crushing weight of being responsible for the world didn’t rest on my shoulders. As if it was a simple decision to treat a human being like an animal in a cage.

As if I didn’t keep hidden intentions from them.

“I mean, Jasper is annoyingly arrogant at times, but I don’t think that’s cause enough to shank him.” Calista shot a wicked smirk in Jasper’s direction.

He slapped his open palm over his heart, as if he’d been impaled by her words and faked stumbling backward. She snickered and returned her attention to the stag.

“This would go faster with some claws, you know,” she said sharply.

We skinned the stag and stripped the meat from its bones, not one of us speaking the entire time. I could scent it on them, their discontentment. They hadn’t even been able to lock her in her room. A tendon in my neck became tight when I realized that I’d locked a woman away twice now. Ends justifying means or some bullshit saying. The friends who worked by my side didn’t know my intentions weren’t pure.

The thought of telling them, of watching the moment they saw me for the monster I was down in my core—unbearable.

After we salted the meat, we wrapped the portions for delivery. The sun bid its farewell over the horizon, and Calista and Jasper wandered off for the evening.

I stared at the key on the table. Minutes went by, and I remained unmoved. She’d been left in that room for a couple of hours now. Guilt attempted searching for a reason to avoid her, to avoid seeing what I’d done, but I knew I should check on her condition from yesterday.

I made my way down the halls, my steps ever slowing as I approached the barred door. The first thing I saw of her was her feet resting on the ground, pointed at the fireplace. Peering around the wall, I saw her sitting casually, propped on her locked in elbows, head tilted over her shoulder.

She stared at the fireplace, the reflection of light twinkling in her eyes. I swallowed my apprehension and stepped fully into view.

“Do you need anything?”

She raised her head, looking directly at me. For a moment, contemplation spread over her features, like she questioned whether or not to say what she wanted.

“What is it?” I probed, a relentless curiosity nipping at my heels for this unreadable creature to speak.

She steadied her breath. “I saw the library.”

Alarm rang through me. This was exactly why I’d reprimanded Calista and Jasper. Clearly, she’d been able to sneak around without them knowing.

“I’d like a book,” she admitted.

A little thrown off, I pressed, “You would? Why?” Not that a book would be a viable weapon against me, no matter how hard she threw it. “I can get you more logs if you’re wanting to stoke the fire.”

Her forehead scrunched as if she smelled something unpleasant. “No, to read.”

Getting Calista or Jasper to read had become so painstaking that I’d given up on the notion entirely.

“Oh.” Breaking the conversation, I left the doorway and went to the study. I could do that for her, after what I’d put her through. Taking in the array of spines along the shelves, I realized I didn’t know what she’d prefer to read. Gripping the key

tighter in my fist, I returned.

Her gaze fell upon me as I worked the lock until it clicked open. She stared, waiting for me to say something.

“Come. You can pick,” I said, backing up to step out of the way.

Her countenance brightened, though she didn’t smile. She crossed the path in front of me, angling herself to go to the study, but stopped. Glancing over her shoulder, green eyes connecting with mine, she said, “Thank you.”

Fire consumed my heart. She should be scared of me, cowering, angry that I’d locked her up, questioning my every move. My body drew in a breath.

Her stare finally fell away, dropping to the floor, hands clasped in front of her. She didn’t budge, as if waiting for further confirmation that she was allowed.

“You already know where it is. Go ahead.” I gestured down the hall.

Her emerald eyes peered up at me, as if worried. A fissure split my chest.

“I’m—I’m not mad,” I said, reassuring her. “It’s actually impressive you found it so quickly. It’s my favorite room in the manor. If we’re being honest, I don’t even think Jasper remembers it’s here half the time.” I offered a smile to ease her concerns.

She took a breath that seemed lighter, and her beautiful lips tilted upward.

That view nearly stole my breath away.

She didn’t look at me like that nearly long enough, beginning her slipper-soft steps down the hall.

She almost disappeared around the corner before I shook myself from my senses and followed behind. I watched her slip into the study.

She lifted her delicate fingers up to the spines, gently dragging them along. Her head tilted to read the titles, and all I could do was take in the sight of her.

Her hair looked different now than last night. More wild, like tumbling vines. And that color, not one I’d ever seen in my long life. The evening sun splashed its orange light over her.

Radiant.

I should have been watching to make sure she didn’t try anything slick, but I found myself watching for an entirely different reason.

I couldn’t stop. She looked aflame in the setting sun, and I was a helpless moth. What sort of magic had the gods cast upon her?

The Coveted. She was desired. I was drawn to her, pulled into the throes of her captivating spell.

Quickly, she targeted a book and plucked it from the shelf. “This one,” she said, turning to me.

Clearing my throat, I stepped back from the door and held out my arm, directing her to return to her room. I had to put distance between us.

She padded out, and despite my head blaring at me to get space, I wished the manor was ten times its size just to make this walk longer.

We reached her room all too soon. She lowered onto her bed, peering at the book in her hands.

“How are you doing?” I asked, unable to insert that key and walk away just yet. Her magic was potent, but I wasn’t trying to act like the monster I appeared to be.

She glanced up at me.

“From yesterday, I mean.” I told myself it was the guilt that needed reassurance, and after that, I’d be fine.

“Oh. I’m a bit sore, but feeling much better.” She glanced down at the book in her hands, stroking her thumb along the cover’s edge.

I inhaled deeply with relief. The memory of her cradled in my arms, skin pale, eyes fluttering between toeing the line of consciousness and oblivion, stung like the whip of a lashing reed. Seeing her now, so vibrant and settled, hearing she felt better, eased the ache in my chest.

“Are you the one who brought me here?” she asked.

Worry returned in full force, extinguishing the loveliness of hearing her voice without anguish. “You don’t remember?” Shit, that wasn’t a good sign. I’d need a healer to see her, have to get Evenita to—

The faintest smile and breathy laugh escaped her lips, and my veins ignited with a soothing fire.

“No, I mean, you’re in charge here? You’re the one responsible for bringing me to this place?”

Now I understood her meaning. “Yes.” As sure as I tried to sound, I could hear the underlying shame.

She nodded, dropping her gaze to the book again. “Okay.”

I feared she’d probe further. What would I tell her? I hadn’t figured out exactly how to get what we needed, and didn’t plan on spilling out every intention.

But she didn’t. She remained silent. Too accepting of her fate.

Instead, she opened the book. Whatever magnetism this red-haired maiden possessed, clarity struck my mind like lightning.

Distance. Now.

I closed the cage door, locked it, and sped from the hallway, winding past the front door to the stairs that led to the second level. My knuckles rapped on Jasper's door, but I didn't wait for his reply before I barged in.

In not my friendliest of manners, I demanded that he be the one who brings her dinner, but not to linger. "Her magic is powerful. The longer you spend around her, the more you'll be willing to reveal our intentions. We can't risk that, not before we figure out how the hell to do this. I've gotta get away and clear my head." I paced before the end of his four-poster bed.

"Man, she really sunk her magical claws into you, huh?" Jasper retorted, noting my frustration.

I shot him a look that said 'don't test me', and he held his hands up placatingly.

"Okay, okay. I was around her earlier though, King. Besides it being nice to have her here, giving us a way to save the kingdom, I didn't feel anything else, really. I mean, it's not like I'm dying to get her out the door or anything, but I'm not wanting to throw myself at her feet either," he admitted.

"She's Coveted. That's part of the spell. We can't fall for it. Any inclination we feel toward her needs to be treated with caution. I won't let her be the siren that sings and calls us to our deaths," I added, saying it more so for myself.

"Okay, fair. I mean, I am amazing," Jasper praised himself, "but I won't let my pride fool me into thinking I'm above powerful magic. I'll let Calista know, too." His voice grew somber. "We're gonna make this work, King."

He didn't know how badly I wanted to hear that assurance, but I wouldn't let myself believe it. Not yet.

"Let's hope."

Beast

I woke, limbs dangling off the too small bed for my size—a regular occurrence, despite it being massive. Birds sang their morning song as the first glimpses of sunrise peeked through the window.

This morning had been one of the first where I didn't wake up, heart racing, running from the dark shadows in my mind.

I still hadn't completely figured out what to do with the girl, but feeling the effects of her magic last night had brought a jarring awareness to the situation.

Had the spell made her that beautiful? Given her hair that rivaled a raging fire, and eyes so green that any forest would dull in comparison? A trap meant to lure the unsuspecting? I couldn't recall a time my wolf eyes gazed upon a woman and drank her in.

Fucking magic.

Lugging myself upright, I buried my face in my paws while placing my feet on the floor. *Get it together, Dante. This isn't the time to let your fucking feelings cloud your judgment. You're the ferocious beast of Argora Vale, and these creatures need your help. Your focus needs to be on them.*

I tore my paws away, casting my gaze out the second story window. My eyes squinted from the morning light. A new day, a new chance to do the right thing.

My daily mantra.

I let hands hang lazily between my legs as I considered our options, waiting to see if any new inspiration came to light. After some time of silent pondering, I detected Calista puttering downstairs.

I meandered through the manor, ignoring the urge to veer down the hall and check on our new guest. Calista stood at the wood stove, cooking up some eggs.

“Morning, sleepy puppy!”

I hated that nickname. A growl rumbled in my chest. “You spoke to Jasper, yeah?”

“Yes. He took dinner duty, and I’ve got breakfast. You know, I hate when I have to keep my curtains open to be woken up by the blazing sun, but morning doesn’t seem so terrible when there are no blood buckets involved.” She waved around the wooden spatula in her hand while she parted her life-altering wisdom.

My furry brow jumped, the only response I could bring myself to give. I glanced at the packaged meat parcels in the corner. “Shit,” I groaned.

“What’s up?” Calista asked, not tearing her attention away from the eggs she sprinkled with basil.

“We’ve gotta deliver the meat today.”

“And? Pretty sure you knew that when you forced us to prep it all yesterday.”

My thoughts turned to the redhead, probably still asleep. Before yesterday, the plan had been to keep her in that celled room. Hence why we even installed that gods awful gate in the first place a few weeks ago.

But something had shifted last night, seeing her so openly accept being imprisoned. The thought of locking her away while all of us left for hours twisted my gut. I didn’t want to leave her unattended—alone.

“She’ll need to come with us today,” I announced.

Resting her hand on her hip while spreading the scramble in the pan, Calista pursed her lips and nodded.

My shoulders dropped a tad when she didn’t give me any push back. “We should leave within the hour, preferably as soon as possible.”

“Hey, if I’m on new girl duty, you’re on waking Jasper duty.”

“Hm,” I grumbled. “Don’t linger around her too long. Her magic is powerful,” I advised before leaving to go to Jasper’s room.

“Got it.” She gave me a mock salute.

The stairs to the second level creaked as I trudged upward, emerging into the hallway on the top floor.

When I'd stumbled upon this place, it was only for shelter during an unruly blizzard. Beast fur or not, exposure to the elements remained less than ideal. The silence and fortification of the walls in the empty, abandoned manor became a refuge. Not for my sake, but for the sake of others. A place where I could shelter, keep from exposing the world to my beast.

It had seen enough of it.

I reached Jasper's room and banged on the door. "Time to get up. Calista's making eggs."

An anticipated, long-drawn, irritated mutter muffled through the door. I knocked again. Unless we made him get up to open the door, he'd fall back asleep, and easily stay that way until the afternoon.

More grumbles, and confirmations of, "I'm up!" rang out, but my knocking remained relentless. Finally, the door flew open.

"If you knock one more time." He barely had his eyes open to threaten me.

A grin tilted my lips as I clapped my paw on his shoulder. "Come on. We've got a big haul today."

He dropped his hands to his sides, craning his head back, a sorrowful look plastered on his scrunched face. He forced his feet forward, slapping them lazily along the floor.

"I know, I know," I soothed my friend who was definitely not a morning person.

We walked to the kitchen where two plates of eggs waited for us, steam rising into the air. My plate was easy to spot, seeing as she probably cracked twelve eggs just for me. We sat at the island and began eating.

Within minutes, Jasper's fatigue washed away, and his optimistic demeanor returned. "I don't know what she puts in here that makes them so damned good!" He savored every bite he chewed, moaning in a fashion I tried to ignore.

"It's basil," I added. Jasper couldn't cook for shit, and he never seemed to grasp ingredients. We'd had this conversation probably thirty times before.

"No, no. It's something else. One day I'll figure it out. Mine never turn out this good." He shoveled more in, filling his cheeks.

Remembering our conversation last night, I asked, "How'd dinner go? With the girl?"

"Fine, yeah." He worked to finish chewing before sharing more on the subject. "I was careful, just like you said. Didn't stay too long. Though, I still didn't notice anything particularly off-putting."

"Good."

How long did I plan to keep her like this, limiting her interactions with us? I had a woman behind bars in my house for gods sake. A prisoner by my hand.

It was that thought that made me come to a decision. Today, I would need to figure out the workings of her magic. The sooner we understood, the sooner we could apply it. When I thought of what would follow after, I silenced my mind, not wanting to face that reality yet.

Calista casually waltzed back into the kitchen, humming a tune.

"Everything go okay?" I inquired. For some reason, I wanted to be aware of every movement the girl took.

Calista furrowed her brow in exaggerated thought. "You know, somehow, I was able to manage giving her eggs, and escort her to the bathroom without becoming a drooling zombie." She huffed a laugh, acting surprised by how she'd managed to accomplish such a task.

I rolled my eyes. "Did she ask any more questions?"

"Yeah, she asked to get another book." Calista placed the key on the kitchen island, and I didn't waste any time picking it up.

Another book? Maybe she didn't enjoy the one she picked. I hoped the next would be more enjoyable. After all, what else did she have to do in that room once I left her in there—trapped.

"Did you eat?" I asked Calista.

"No, I brought hers first."

"Okay, well eat quickly. I'll pull the wagon around, then get her." I started making my way outside.

"Did you get her name?" Jasper asked Calista while my back was turned.

I paused, some sort of silent desperation to hear it.

"Didn't ask," Calista said through a mouthful. "Just told her she was safe here. She seemed so timid, like a baby deer or something. Made me feel worse returning her to that room. She's not a fucking dog to let out for a pee and put back in a kennel."

I shoved the back door open, sending it crashing against the outside wall. After I pulled the wagon to the front of the manor, just behind the steel gates, I entered through the front door. Building mental defenses for the task ahead, I braced myself before marching down the hall.

Standing before the bars, I did my best to avoid eye contact. "We need to go out today. You'll have to come."

She looked angelic as she gracefully lifted from the bed and retrieved her cape on the chair, and grabbed her mittens. Not an ounce of resistance. No sign that I'd put her through hell to get here.

I almost wished she'd scream or throw punches, give me something more than compliance. Gone was the girl who swatted at me, who slipped from my grasp and ran into the woods. I should be grateful, but it was almost as if a spark had been snuffed

out.

That bothered me.

She donned her cloak, a couple loose curls falling out from under her hood, slipped on her boots, and stood ready for me to direct her next movements. Hands clasped before her, she kept her head down.

My throat strained, and I swallowed against it, staring down at her. A growing urge to reach out and tuck the curl that rested against her face made me grip my fists. The thought of her wincing at my claws reaching toward her porcelain skin reminded me of what I'd become—who I'd become.

I needed to make things right.

Spinning on my heel, I walked away without saying a word. Fuck, the tendrils of her magic grew stronger with every interaction. I loathed the way it threw everything off, distracted me from my purpose.

A thought occurred. What if this was how her magic worked? What if I had to give in, welcome it? What if resisting denied its power to find my truest desires?

These questions burrowed under my skin. I hadn't heard of magic being so cleverly intuitive, but it would make sense that it would search to find the answer. Did she send her power into the hearts of others? Was she aware of what it found? That thought had the fortification around my heart clamping down with unforgiving force.

She followed on soft steps, decades of honed animalistic senses keeping tabs on the woman I couldn't bring myself to look at.

I squeezed through the kitchen frame, meeting Jasper and Calista. "Ready?"

They nodded.

"You bet," Jasper enthusiastically replied. I saw the moment his eyes fell upon our guest entering behind me. "You excited for a little trip?!"

Calista nudged his side with her elbow. "She just had a *bad* trip. Don't phrase it like that." She turned to face the girl. "It's just an errand. Nothing too strenuous." She offered a reassuring smile.

I felt thankful for Calista. For being a voice of comfort, care, and assurance. My asshole self kept seeming to forget that part.

Allowing only my gaze to drift in her direction, I tried catching her response in my periphery. She remained silent. When it became evident to all of us she would remain that way, I took the lead.

"Alright. Let's go." I led the way out the back door over the snow covered cobblestones to the front gate where the wagon sat, already loaded.

Calista explained to the girl that we were stopping at a few residences and then the market, but that we'd be back in time for the next meal.

Calista and Jasper released the chains holding the gate closed. The screech rang out into the snow silenced woods around us, a nearby crow our only observer.

They pushed the creaky gates through the snow until they hit the bank, giving us enough clearance. Positioning myself in front of the wagon, facing ahead, I squatted and picked up the long handles meant to tack onto horses.

When my grip was sturdy, I trudged on, dragging the wheels through the built up snow. The rickety click of the wheels created a noise barrier between me and the others following behind. Knowing they were with her should have provided more comfort, but I wished I had her in my view.

To keep an eye on, I told myself.

Dante



Our first stop would take us about ten minutes to get to. My senses remained sharp, constantly scanning the trees. A delivery never would have made me think twice before, but since the kingdom started experiencing a food shortage, reports of thieves had increased.

Being one of the most notorious beasts of the forest, I doubted anyone would dare to overtake me. Calista always packed her bow and arrow, and Jasper held a fighting advantage as well. The girl was in safe hands with them as they trailed behind, but if we had heard rumors of The Coveted, surely others had, too. I'd tried moving swiftly out of Highcrest to avoid detection, but my sheer size had me doubting I'd made it out unseen.

A thin stream of billowing smoke in the distance signaled our arrival. We approached the tiny picket fence surrounding the cottage with a hay-laden roof, and I set the wagon down, the wood creaking as it thudded against the packed snow. The others caught up by the time I tossed back the cloth to retrieve the individually wrapped portion.

Calista came up to my side, and I handed off the package. This was as far as I'd go. She took it, and without a word, let herself through the waist-high gate, walking up the short path to the front door. She knocked, and I leaned against the wagon with my back turned.

Jasper and the girl waited with me. I noted the blushing across her pale cheeks and the tip of her now rosy nose.

Mumbled conversation exchanged between Calista and Mrs. Mills. With my predatory hearing, I could listen if I wanted, but chose to ignore it. Attempting to distract myself, I looked upon The Coveted. Her beautiful emerald eyes oversaw the exchange. Jasper stretched, twisting his torso and groaning. He set his hands upon his bare waist, still only wearing his usual attire of shorts.

“Mind if I take a lap?” he asked.

I gave a nod of approval.

“Watch this.” He wagged his brows at our new companion and shot off into the sky, expanding his wings. He launched over the trees until he flew out of sight. My gaze quickly fell back to the alluring woman in front of me. She monitored the sky with barely hidden fascination, trying to catch any traces of the flying gargoyle.

“He’ll be back in a minute. Flying is like stretching his legs, his wings will cramp if he doesn’t,” I said. This experience must be jarring, entering a new kingdom with strange creatures. As much as I could, I wanted to ease her transition.

She turned to me, nodding briefly before dropping her head.

I couldn’t take it anymore, the glimpses of her personality buried under layers of sadness or fear. “What’s your name?”

She ignored the question, leaving me to stand in a puddle of regret for overriding my better judgment. *Don’t get close.*

“Hi King,” the melodic sound of one of the boys who lived at this house called out. I glanced over to find Petri emerging from the thickets, carrying his trusty slingshot.

The Coveted girl twisted, glancing over her shoulder. The movement drew her hood down, revealing that striking hair. The boy looked bored until his gaze snagged on her, and he stopped dead in his tracks, eyes widening.

“Woah. You’re *beautiful*.” He drew out the word while he took in the sight of her radiant red hair.

“Thank you,” she responded, softly while quickly covering up once again.

I shifted on my feet, arms folded. Why did he get a response and I didn’t?

The boy plastered on a proud smile, before puffing his chest and swaggering by me, as if he somehow knew.

Calista passed the boy on her way back to the wagon, raising her hand for a high five. “Hey P.” Their mittens collided mid-air. She returned to my side. “Mrs. Mills was very grateful. Even wanted to offer her thanks to you.” She punched me in the arm with a pleased, one-sided grin.

That took me by surprise. I peered back at the cottage. Mrs. Mills flashed a brief smile before stepping back and closing the door after Petri waltzed inside. Hope didn’t take up much residence in my heart anymore, but I’d wanted for this for a long

time. An inkling of acceptance, of reduced fear.

Of forgiveness.

Jasper appeared as an ever-increasing dot in the sky before he landed. "Woo! That felt good." He flexed his wings to their full span, webbed connections of darkened veins spanning the gray membranous tissue.

Calista and I remained unfazed, but our guest's eyes bulged a little while she took in the sight. Unfortunately, Jasper saw it too.

"Impressed?" He cocked an eyebrow and flexed his biceps, angling his torso and arms in different directions to show off his physique, which, although slim, was admittedly defined.

An audible groan pairing with an eye roll escaped Calista. "Come on, *Fabio*." She slapped her palm in the center of his chest and urged him to move.

His fancy footwork prevented him from tripping. "Hey!" he said. "That obnoxious witch wishes he was as good looking as me."

"Well, you definitely win the category for most handsome half-gargoyle!" Calista rested her hand on his shoulder as the pair of them walked away.

"I'm the *only* half-gargoyle," Jasper said, resenting her statement.

"Exactly!" She tossed her hands in the air and he gave her a little shove.

Their voices had already begun to fade as I covered the meat back up with the fabric tarp and readied to travel to our next destination.

This time, when I started pulling the wagon, it was her and me walking in tandem. The first few yards were filled with silence, except for the creaking wagon and the faint conversation between Calista and Jasper up ahead.

Several questions resonating at the forefront of my mind begged to get out. The mental gymnastics from going back and forth, deciding whether or not to ask—let alone which ones—became dizzying until finally I couldn't hold back.

"Did yo—"

"How ma—"

We both went to speak at the same time, and the surprise of hearing her voice had me snapping my attention to her. "Go on," I encouraged.

"How many people are you feeding?" Her soft voice floated to my ears like a gentle caress.

"About a dozen," I replied. She asked such a reasonable question, so casually, as if she wasn't being held against her will and forced to participate.

I wondered if she'd probe further, but apparently that satiated her curiosity because we continued in silence. Asking her name again would only sound pathetic, though the desire to know didn't stop pestering me.

Eventually, we made it to the next home. Calista and Jasper waited out front, playing rock, paper, scissors to pass the time. Normally my pace didn't lag, but I'd slowed for the girl so she didn't strain herself.

"I'm getting real tired of you." Jasper squinted at Calista, resting his fists on his sides as he glowered.

She shrugged, a cocky smile stamped on her face. Jasper stormed over, retrieving the bundle of meat from the wagon. Walking past us, he sneered. "We sure her powers are contained to the crystal ball?"

I crossed my arms over my chest, humming in confirmation. Jasper shook his head, not fully believing. As he walked by our shaggy blonde friend again, he spat out, "Seems like more than luck."

She shook her head. "Hey, don't play if you can't handle losing."

His lips slapped together as he released a disbelieving breath. We stood, waiting more than a few yards away from the home. The boy who answered smiled and thanked Jasper, who crouched down on his knees to chat at eye level. When the boy spotted me, he quickly ran inside.

That was the type of reaction I'd experienced most since Evenita came along. The kind I wanted to eliminate. Some had started warming up to me, and progress, like from Mrs. Mills today, inspired hope it could continue. Though I doubted I deserved it.

After we made four more stops, two doors went unanswered. The meat packages from a couple weeks ago remained untouched, decaying on the porch. Perhaps they'd rather starve than accept my help any longer. I'd have Evenita inquire.

We arrived at the next home, Jasper and Calista both carrying the delivery for the bigger family, leaving me and the girl waiting by the wagon yet again. The sound of clicking hit my ears, and they pinned to my head as I searched out the sound.

I fell upon the girl's lovely face, and though she tried to hide it, her teeth were chattering.

"You're cold?" I stated more than asked.

She shook her head, running her hands up and down her arms. "I'm f-fine."

We were only half finished but had probably been out for a couple hours already. At first, I'd wanted us to all travel together, safety in numbers. Seeing her suffer motivated me to change my plans.

When Jasper and Calista returned, I let them know of the change.

"This is taking too long. We need to make a stop at Evenita's. Jasper, can you make a couple air trips and drop off to the rest

of the stops on the road toward the market? I'll be taking the wagon, but you know the route."

"You bet." He nodded.

"And you to the Myers?"

Calista confirmed. "Then meet at the market before noon?"

"Yes."

They made quick work to gather their designated portions.

With the wagon bed mostly cleared, I reached my paws toward her. "Come on, I'll help you up."

If she was confused, she didn't say anything. Nor did she hesitate. She stepped into my grasp, allowing me to hold her by the hips to hoist her onto the flatbed. Seeing someone unafraid loosened something tight in my chest, and the warmth from her body burned my palms.

I gathered the tarp that'd covered the wagon and draped it over her shoulders, bunching it around her sides.

"I'll get you warm in a few minutes, okay?" I don't know why, but I waited. I stared into her beautiful eyes, searching for confirmation. She gave it with a nod. Only then did I position myself at the front and hoisted the handles, setting off until a small cozy cottage stood before us.

Smoke bloomed from the chimney, and a flickering fire could be seen through the window. Good, she'd warm quickly. I set down the handles and approached the back. Trying to act casual, as if I wasn't looking forward to holding her in my hands again, I gently said, "We're here." She let me help her down, and every gnash of her teeth against themselves hammered my guilty conscience.

We approached the door, and I knocked. A few moments went by, nothing to greet us but silence, and I knocked again. I couldn't sense anyone behind the door, but the girl beside me trembled. Waiting was no longer an option, so I let myself inside without a proper invitation. Evenita could rake me over the coals about it later. Unable to stop myself, I settled my paw over the girl's lower back and encouraged her to step over the threshold. She did.

Instantly, the warmth of the roaring fire encapsulated us, and I closed the door to shut out the lingering cold. She sighed, bringing her hands out from under her cape, and removed her mittens. I gestured to the rocking chair near the fireplace.

"You can take a seat if you'd like."

She performed a double take between me and the chair, but put up no argument. The cold must have really gotten to her if she didn't search for verified confirmation. Quickly, she undid the button on her cape and draped it over the back of the chair, revealing her petite frame clothed in Calista's pants and shirt.

Dancing flames reflected in her eyes, and relief washed over her. Seeing her mood lighten while she soaked in the heat made my stomach flip.

The aroma of simmering vegetables drew my attention to a steaming pot of stew. On the table beside it sat two bowls and spoons, already prepared. The pot was big enough to feed an entire family. Evenita wouldn't mind if I shared some with the girl.

"Can I fix you a bowl?"

She brought her attention to the table. I could see the thoughts running through her head, but she shook it. Her stomach betrayed her the moment she did, growling louder than the crackling fire.

"I think that's a yes." I didn't wait before picking up the ladle and dumping a generous serving into the dish. Out of season vegetables floated in the broth, a tribute to Evenita's herbalist magic on this tiny plot of unsullied land.

I handed her the bowl and she reached for it with both hands. "Thank you," she said softly.

"You're allowed to ask me for things. If you're hungry, you just need to say so. If you're cold, we'll go inside. I know this situation is...abnormal, and for that I'm sorry. I'm not here to be your enemy, though you probably see me as such."

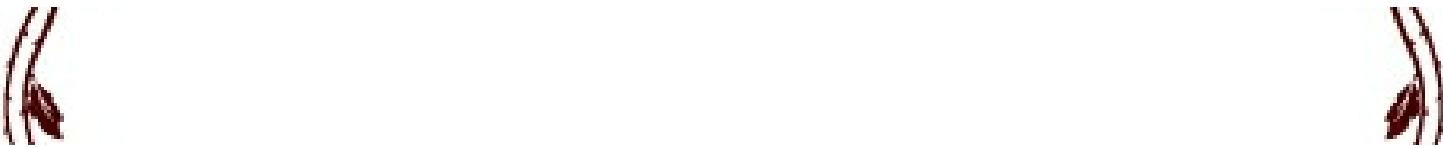
I retrieved the spoon and passed it to her. She took it, sliding it into the stew, giving it a contemplative stare. I could tell she wasn't willing to converse yet, so I wouldn't press for a response.

She finally raised a spoonful to her mouth. Her lush, pink lips rested against it, blowing away the steam.

I'd never been jealous of a spoon before.



Mira



If the roof of this cottage didn't slope upward, I wasn't sure the beast would fit. His chest rose and fell, slower than I'd seen at times, as he stared. The energy had shifted, an unidentifiable tension filling the room. His eyes remained focused, but I couldn't quite read his silence.

When he'd told me I could ask for anything, it didn't feel like it had at the castle. Under Prince Nicholas's care, anything could be at my disposal. Access and resources weren't issues, hardly a bother.

This, however, felt more...considerate. They'd been on a time schedule, and despite the plummeting winter temperature, I wouldn't have dared do or say something that would delay them. Silent, obedient. No trouble. Those were the tactics I knew, and regardless that I'd grown cold—freezing, if I were being honest—I would have pushed through. Yet, when the beast noticed my teeth begin to chatter, he'd changed his plans immediately, bringing me here.

If I let myself, I might actually believe it was decency. But with each chew of the seasoned vegetables, I reminded myself of my reality.

They held the expectation that I could bless them.

So I ate in silence, falling into the safety net of the familiar persona I needed to evoke.

Eventually I finished eating, the warm, delicious soup thoroughly melting away the chill. He offered me more, but I shook my head. Where even were we? Whose house was this? Would we get in trouble for being here? A bit of guilt eased off my conscience when he'd prepared himself a bowl and ate—granted, it only took him two bites.

Watching his giant paws work with a comparatively tiny spoon nearly had me chuckling, but the potential danger from him interpreting it as an insult held me in check.

He took my empty bowl, along with his own, and rinsed them in the sink using a bucket of water. The way he moved around the kitchen had the ease of familiarity. Whoever's house this was, he'd been here before.

"If you're ready, we should get going," he said.

I nodded, rising to my feet and began putting my winter garments back on.

"Are you?"

I paused and glanced at my coat. He couldn't have expected I dress within that brief second, could he? Was his veil of patience wearing thin? That nervous thought had me stilling.

"Are you ready?"

I reached for the gloves faster. "Almost, I just need to—"

"No, I mean are you *ready* to leave. To go back out there. If you're not, we can wait a bit longer."

"Oh." Breath rushed from my lungs. When was the last time someone had let me be in control? The option felt...unnatural. Sure, at the castle I had luxury in abundance with time to myself for whatever I wished, but when the prince summoned, I had to go. This was like I was a part of the decision. My stomach tumbled. *Don't be difficult.* "I am ready."

Whether or not I wished to remain seated by the fire, I wouldn't say. I finished dressing and pulled up my hood, tucking loose strands of hair underneath.

Meekly, I presented myself, mitten covered hands clasped before me. He didn't move, and I couldn't bring myself to look up at him. The steady crackling from the fire ate the silence, and I didn't know what he wanted from me.

Predicting the actions and responses of the two male creatures and the woman grew more complicated. The allure of The Coveted didn't hold the same effect with them. It made me concerned that my usual tactics wouldn't hold the same weight. As the seconds passed and tension increased, I thought I might have to announce that I was ready until finally he budged from his spot and opened the front door. Cold air quickly nipped at my nose. I already missed the fire.

Allowing me to exit first, he stepped out of the way. I briefly dipped my head in thanks, then walked outside into the biting winter air. We returned to the wagon. He'd been kind enough to allow me to ride in the back on the way here, when my body

trembled and shook. Now, I was once again prepared to follow. To keep silent and keep pace.

“Do you want to walk or get in the back?” he asked.

My cheeks heated with the presentation of another choice. “I’ll walk.” *Don’t be difficult.*

His canine gaze trailed me from head to toe briefly before he said, “If you change your mind, you’ll let me know?”

I nodded.

He sighed. “Okay.” I could have sworn his throat bobbed.

We began working through the snow, leaving that humble cottage behind.



No matter how many trees we passed, hundreds, thousands, I couldn’t stop from inspecting each one that bore the unnatural black mark of the old curse.

The green pines and evergreens that sprouted, a dash of life to an otherwise decaying wood, must have sprung up long after. Their resilience was admirable, growing in soil that fought to repress it.

My breath created clouds before my eyes, and sometimes I’d focus on that. Evidence that I was walking side by side with a cursed beast in a cursed land, and somehow still breathing.

It struck me then. Fear. Or rather, the lack of it. These woods held creatures that would, and had tried to, eat me. I had no idea what other dangers could possibly be lurking in hidden places I couldn’t see, and yet...I held no fear.

Even at the castle, surrounded by my entourage of guardsmen, I’d been keenly aware of their movements, their expressions, their tones. How was it that walking with the beast felt more comfortable?

My attention dropped to the comforting rhythmic crunch of his steps beside mine. He had to be slowing his pace considerably. The sheer size of him would mean he could easily cover twice as much distance in a single stride. Much more mindful than he’d been in the forest on our journey here.

I supposed Jasper had been telling the truth, the beast hadn’t meant to be so rough. I fought the urge to ask why he was doing any of this. Why he wanted me here, why they did.

Soft sounds filtered through the trees, barely audible above the sound of the wagon churning against the snow.

“We’re here,” the beast said. “Our business will be quick.”

It came into view then, a bustling market. Seeing more residents in this kingdom still came as a surprise, though I didn’t know why since I’d heard my new captors share other names. I supposed I hadn’t realized the magnitude. Though still smallish dots in the distance, there were easily several dozen people here.

After a few minutes, we joined the throng. The beast left the wagon on the outskirts, grabbing the last remaining packages from the back. I stuck close to his side as we maneuvered through the crowd.

I didn’t know where to look. At first glance, this could be any other market set up in the midst of a town. Colorful, yet still structured the same. Stalls, booths, and carts scattered about. Finer details revealed this was no ordinary market.

Witches. Full-blooded witches. Crystalline eyes in all colors. They’d become a rare occurrence to spot in Highcrest, and I’d assumed that’s because they themselves were rare. Yet in this place, they were in abundance. Their own private corner of the world, undisturbed by the prejudice they’d face elsewhere.

A bright light flashed, and in the place a woman had just stood, an owl took off into the trees, carrying a bag in its talons. It was shocking to witness, but not surprising. A talking beast walked beside me, after all, and I lived with a humanoid gargoyle. Suddenly, the towering beast didn’t seem so out of place—except for the uneasiness that spread across a few faces when their gazes spotted him.

They hastily concluded their business and checked over their shoulder as they raced away. Similar to some we’d made deliveries to. Were they intimidated by his large stature?

Arrays of colorful jars filled with potions and liquids lined one booth. Bundles of dried herbs at another. Crystals sat on display, kinds I’d never seen in Highcrest.

Pelts and blankets. Candles. A mix of the ordinary and the extraordinary. A few creatures who held animalistic features on a mostly humanoid form, like Jasper, waltzed through the crowd, ignored by others. Even the beast seemed to linger on them longer than others as they passed.

I attempted to conceal my gawking stare, but couldn’t help explore the vast differences from what I’d known my whole life.

I watched a woman hover her fingers over some snow behind her booth. It melted, turning into water, and she fed it through the air like a snake until it filled empty cups lining her shelves. A few paused their shopping to barter an item for a glass, chugged it, then moved on.

A man at the booth beside her sold planters with sprouts shooting out, despite the season. People and creatures blessed with magic. Unashamed. Openly wielding. Magic persecution didn't exist here. A glimpse into how the world would have looked had fear not tainted the hearts of mankind.

A familiar set of wings emerged from the crowd. Jasper spotted us and waved us over. He stood at a booth where a dark-skinned man with unnaturally white hair was unloading his setup for the day behind the counter.

"Just one second," the beast said, stopping before a stall to my left.

"Ah, there you are! I started to expect we might not see you." A smiling, orange-eyed man greeted.

"Sorry for the delay. Hopefully this makes up for it." He handed over a pack of parcels held together by string.

"I can't tell you what this means to me," the man said, taking the packages, his voice quieter than before. The man swallowed a lump forming in his throat. "Last week, my children had to go without dinner two nights in a row. Their cries still haunt me."

The beast leaned in. "Try to make it last." He kept the exchange between them, but my prying ears picked it up.

"Thanks for distributing these."

The witch's crystal-like orange eyes glistened with understanding and he tucked the meat behind his stall. Tools such as axes and hammers sat on display, a blacksmith by the looks of it.

The beast nodded before he rested his paw on my lower back, inching me forward. I didn't shrink from the touch. We closed the gap between us and Jasper.

"I need to find Evenita. I stole some of her soup," the beast said.

"Sure thing, King." Jasper saluted. "Me and my new bestie can handle ourselves. Isn't that right?" Jasper nudged my shoulder.

A smile formed on my lips before I knew it was happening.

"I'll be back soon," the beast said to me quietly. A promise lacing his words. For some reason, it was comforting. Maybe he had stolen me from my home, but in this strange kingdom, I'd rather stick with the creatures I knew than the ones I didn't.

I found myself replying, "Okay."

He watched me for a moment longer, and I him, before he strode into the crowd. Jasper slid into view. "I have someone I want to introduce you to."

I turned, meeting a pair of light mint green eyes behind the counter.

"This is Hu," Jasper said with a grin, gesturing to a tall, slender young witch.

Hu's smile was as white as his hair that was shaved on one side and spiked up and parted on the other.

Hu dipped his chin in a brief nod. "Hello."

I nodded timidly in greeting, uncomfortable with the idea of being presented before others. I knew where that normally led. A brief glimpse of my cloak had me confirming my hood was secured.

Hu continued unpacking loaves and presenting them along the wooden waist-high countertop. A baker's stall. Cloth folded in a crossed over pattern surrounded each loaf, allowing only the perfectly rounded domed tops to peak out.

Jasper strode around the stall, letting himself behind the counter, depositing the packed meat. He leaned in and kissed Hu on the cheek.

"Bread?" Jasper asked, reaching below the countertop.

Hu smacked his hand, and Jasper retracted, coddling it with the other. "Ow!" He feigned pain.

"You can't just be taking stock. Not with the dwindling supply of flour. There haven't been any leftovers in weeks. I'll be sold out soon." Hu dragged his gaze across the couple dozen loaves.

"Oh, come on. We have a guest! Surely you don't want to leave her without tasting bread from the finest baker this side of Argora Vale?!" Jasper tossed me a wink, which made Hu slide his glare to me.

He tightened his lips, bouncing his gaze between Jasper and me for a moment. "Fine. But next time, you're paying double."

"Yes," Jasper hissed, clutching his fist and pulling it to his side in victory.

Hu finally cracked his stoic demeanor, flashing a smile he tried to keep behind his tight lips.

Jasper struck like an asp, snatching a freshly baked loaf from the display.

"Are you swindling my favorite person again?" Calista joined us at the stand, her glare throwing daggers at Jasper. "Did he pay?" she asked Hu.

"The deal is double next time," Hu said, shaking his head at Jasper with folded arms. There was a gleam in his eyes, one that conveyed strong affection. Maybe love.

"Hold him to that," Calista said.

"Hey, hey. What's with all the hostility?!" Jasper held up his hands.

The three of them continued chatting, but my attention wandered. I found myself scoping the crowd, watching for any signs of a wolf's head above the others. Instead, I saw a pair of piercing amethyst eyes. Her silver hair flowed around her face, and I instantly recognized her—the witch from Sunvale's market. She smiled, as if she recognized me, too.

People moved through the crowd, and the next instant, she was gone. I searched for signs of her, but just like last time, she'd vanished. I scanned until my eyes caught on twirling flames. A juggler performed, throwing flames sticks around—wait, no.

Not sticks. Rods of pure flame danced in the air in a captivating performance.

My lips parted, my jaw falling open. None of them touched her hands as she mimicked tossing them in the air.

“Hey.” Calista broke me from my trance. “You good?” She peered into the crowd, tracking where my focus had gone.

I realized she’d been speaking to me. “Yes. Sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry. I also often drown out this yuppie.” She pointed her thumb toward Jasper.

“I’m right here! You know what? No bread for you. Only me and my new bestie.” He winked at me, extending a torn piece. I thought about the last time he’d presented me with food, and I didn’t know if it was the relaxed demeanor they constantly shared, or the jovial nature with which he always addressed me, but somewhere in recent minutes, my guard had fallen.

“Just don’t put wet lettuce on it this time,” the playfulness dripped off my tongue. My mouth snapped closed. I could hardly believe my own retort. Being around their consistent, casual banter made it so easy to...participate. What I said hadn’t been a formula, devised to be cryptic. It wasn’t a memorized passage of poetry. A tiny flutter tickled my stomach from the exchange.

Hu snickered, and Calista’s mouth formed a giant ‘o’ shape as she slid her gaze to Jasper. “I told you it was weird!” She smacked his chest with the back of her hand.

Jasper stared at me, wide-eyed and with a smile. “Okay. That’s fair.”

My skin heated from the attention.

Jasper extended the offering again. “Lettuce free, I promise.”

It was bread in his hand, but it felt like something more. I accepted the offering at the same time the beast, their king, returned.

“Are you all ready to head back?” he asked.

He stood so close that his fur grazed my cloak, his body forming a protective barrier against the winter chill and unknown occupants of the market.

“You bet,” Jasper said. “Dinner tomorrow?” he asked Hu.

“You got it, love,” Hu replied.

We funneled away from the market, heading back toward the woods. On route, a small witch girl, with eyes as blue as a foreign sea, gripped her stomach. A woman nearby exchanged desperate words with a man behind a now closed booth. The girl’s mother. She was begging for food.

The sight of the little girl’s twisted mouth did something to me. Stay silent, stay obedient, stay unnoticed. Those reminders plagued my mind, reminding me of the cursed black lines scorching the land. Maybe it was because my life didn’t feel actively in danger, or because I’d already crossed boundaries I’d set for myself. Maybe a lifetime of being unable to do anything piled on too thick in this moment that I had to do something or it would crush me. A vision of a dirty hat in the mud flashed before my eyes.

My heart lodged itself in my throat as my feet veered in a different direction from the group. My life was always in peril, but Calista had said we had food. This girl didn’t. I’d rather risk being locked in that room forever than knowing I could have helped this poor girl and didn’t.

No one grabbed me, yelled for me to stop or return. In ten steps I brought myself before the little girl, hand extended.

Her eyes widened as big as dinner plates when she beheld the bread. I smiled, moving it closer. She raised her glove covered fingers and took it. When that bread lifted from my palm, a layer of shame went with it. I slipped away before the little girl’s mother returned, finding my group of travelers standing watch.

Jasper gave a tight-lipped nod, approval simmering in his gaze. Calista held her own arms, like the scene broke her heart. And the beast; I couldn’t quite read the look in his eye as he worked his throat. I secured the hood of my cloak tighter, averting my gaze and dropping it to the snowy ground. No one spoke as we continued. Maybe I should have apologized, but I wouldn’t.

Majority of the stands we passed were unoccupied, by customer or merchant, and the few that remained open had limited stock which I imagined would soon be picked clean judging by the lineups that formed. A passing glimpse over my shoulder confirmed what I expected. Hu’s stand already had a dozen patrons lined at the ready.

It seemed things were taking an ugly turn in this kingdom. No wonder they wanted the security of The Coveted.

But what would that mean when I couldn’t be what they wanted?

Dante



We returned to the manor, and though I had planned on always keeping The Coveted locked in that room, I couldn't bring myself to do it. The tip of my claw scraped against the groove on the key as I stared at the red-haired maiden warming her hands by the fire.

"I need a bath. I'm fucking freezing." Calista's entire body shook with a violent shiver. "Do you want one first?" she asked our guest.

The girl peered over her shoulder, confirming she was the one being asked. Her delicate lashes fluttered for a moment before she shook her head. "No, thank you."

My heart skipped a beat hearing her reply, not just her usual shy gestures. Hope kindled that she may be warming up to us. Probably a selfish desire to ebb the growing ache of my guilt that we were keeping someone here against their will.

"I'm going to try and find Evenita. Jasper, can I speak to you for a second?" I took a few steps into the room, setting the key down on the game board before stalking down the hall, gargoyle in tow.

"What's up?" he asked, crossing his arms.

I lowered my voice. "Keep an eye on her. You don't have to lock her in her room, but if she bolts, I know you'll be fast enough to catch her."

He inhaled deeply, as if full of responsibility. "You got it."

"If she wants to use the library, she can," I said, glancing between his wings to the woman pooled in front of the glowing hearth.

Jasper's arms dropped to his sides, a semblance of hurt on his face. "You won't even let Calista or I in there without you." I grimaced. "You never want to go in there, and you'd probably just use books for game pieces."

His eyes drifted up to the side before he shrugged with a smile. "You're right."

"She actually likes to read. And I don't have to worry about her burning my books."

"We'd had an ice storm! The wood was frozen and wouldn't catch. It was one time!" He offered his defense for the seventieth time since it happened last year.

Apparently, I was still bitter about it. "I should be back soon."

"Ay ay, King." Jasper saluted before sauntering back to the parlor. "Hey, do you want to learn how to play?" he asked the girl on the floor as he gestured to the game board.

I followed, standing in the hall before the foyer, still watching her. "You can say no," I felt the need to remind her. Those green eyes flitted to me before a soft smile appeared on her lips. She nodded in understanding.

"I would," she said, to my surprise. She rose to her feet, then sat herself in Calista's usual chair, the one that angled toward the game.

I almost couldn't leave as Jasper became overly excited and started giving way too much detail about the pieces they used and what they represented, or could represent, in the game. I'd known them for three years and still didn't understand how to play. It was all jumbled nonsense. I kind of doubted Jasper and Calista really knew either, though they played almost every day when Calista wasn't sneaking around Higherest in the summer months.

My paws clamped around the last meat parcel in my hand, a reminder that I had one last delivery. I left the manor, but for the entire duration of my walk, I thought about how it felt to see The Coveted coming out of her shell.



"You don't need to thank me," Evenita said, accepting the parcel and brushing me off with the wave of her hand.

"I...You knew?" I hadn't spoken a single word since the woman opened the door and greeted me with that.

"I'm a gracious host, even when I'm not home. Now shut the door behind you, boy," she said, already unwrapping the meat and grabbing her tenderizer.

"I brought someone else into your home when you weren't here. You're not upset?" I winced as she banged that steel hammer into the meat, all the dishes and utensils on her counter rattling from the force.

"Over you stopping in on your delivery route after the temperature dropped ten degrees since yesterday? No. I'm glad you felt comfortable enough to help yourself."

Bang, bang, bang.

"Where were you earlier? I didn't see you at the market either."

"I had people to see, places to be." She kept her explanation vague, and I wouldn't pry.

The chair before the fireplace where The Coveted had sat earlier seemed so empty now, even as the glowing firelight caressed the fabric.

"I'll be headed out for about a week. But don't think that means you can just come in here all willy-nilly, tracking snow into my house." She waved the tenderizer at me and looked pointedly at my feet.

I glanced down at where tufts of snow now littered her floor. "Sorry."

She ceased banging the meat. "Before I leave, I need to caution you." She set down the steel hammer, resting her knuckles on her hip while turning to face me. "You need to be careful and mind your beast, boy."

My furry eyebrows pinched together. "It hasn't been an issue."

"I know." She gave me that warm smile of hers, the one that I never got to see from my own mother as she aged. "Something else is plaguing you."

"Nope," I said too quickly for it to be true.

"You get one life, Dante. Long though it may be, there are no do-overs. It's reasonable to want to find happiness for yourself."

I didn't want to speak about this now. Of course she'd find a way to highlight my biggest insecurity. "Thanks for the soup, Evenita." With that, I exited the cozy home.

Mira



Calista had joined us, a towel wrapping her head. "But only when the mountains are experiencing a rainy season," she said, offering an addendum to what Jasper had explained about a certain move in their made up game, Druids & Horseshoes.

"Right, and not if an ogre has belched within two turns," Jasper added.

"Yeah, that too." Calista nodded.

I had followed the rules of the game for the most part, but when the exceptions and possible varying circumstances were brought into play, I couldn't keep up. During the hour the beast was gone, I pretty much just listened.

"If you watch us play a few rounds, I'm sure you'll pick it up," Calista encouraged, a smile spreading on her face.

The front door opened, and I sat up straight. A moment later, the beast appeared. I released a breath, thankful to have him back. Though I didn't know how far the reach of my reputation spread in this kingdom, I found myself preferring to remain secure and guarded by a beast than not. Well, I supposed not any beast.

Him.

He kicked off the snow that'd clung to his fur before his eyes immediately found mine. I realized I'd been staring. His gaze broke first, dropping to the board, and then to Jasper and Calista.

"Have you been talking this poor girl's ear off the entire time I was gone?" he asked them.

"I think she's almost got it!" Jasper said, looking at me for confirmation.

My cheeks heated. I tried shaking the attention by giving a shrug.

"Oh, hey, I was thinking. Today at the market, you thought that Marxia's fire was cool, right? The girl who tossed flames like she was juggling?" Calista said.

I thought back to the dazzling display. "Yes."

She leaned forward, wearing a cocky smirk. "Would you wanna get a closer look?"

"What do you mean?" I asked. The beast shuffled through the room, stopping for only a moment before continuing through the house.

Calista adjusted the towel atop her head. "She's my friend."

Jasper made a snickering noise. "*Friend.*" He looked at me and wagged his brows.

"Shut up." Calista punched his arm.

He pretended to seal his lips and toss away the key. I had to flatten my smile, not wanting to offend her.

"Anyway, I just noticed that you thought it was cool. You probably haven't seen magic wielded like that. Or, like this." Calista brought up a hand, letting her fingers swim through the air.

From the game board, a chess piece wobbled before lifting upward without anyone touching it. My mouth fell open, my eyes wide, taking in the display. "You have magic," I whispered.

"Did you think you were the only one?" she teased before dropping the piece. It fell on the board with a clatter before rolling on its side.

"If you think that's impressive, watch this," Jasper said, straightening in his seat.

"Jasper, no, don't—" Calista's words didn't reach him in time.

The humanoid creature turned to solid stone before my eyes, his skin now holding the cracks and divots of worn rock. Wood groaned and Calista sprung up.

"Damn it, Jas, if you break this couch—"

Jasper returned to the form I'd become familiar with, his skin losing the rough texture. The groaning stopped, and he buried his neck between his shoulders. "Oops."

Calista sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose. "Besides, Marxia has a collection of clothes she hasn't been able to sell for a few weeks now. I know she'd be happy to have some taken off her hands. I'm guessing my style isn't the same as yours?"

I gazed down at the matching shirt and pants she'd given me yesterday. I went to say no before I realized that I didn't actually know. I'd become so accustomed to only one or two outfits for days to weeks at a time up until the castle. But even then, I dreaded the corsets they'd bind me in. "I guess I don't know what my style is." The words sounded as pathetic to my ears as they did in my head.

"Marxia's got a variety of stuff. I'm sure she'll have something you'll like."

Jasper leaned back into a more comfortable position on the couch. "Well, if you don't have favorite kinds of clothes, do you have a favorite kind of food? Dessert? Some dish that makes you happy?"

"Um." I couldn't form a single thought. I tried recalling what I'd been fed over the years. No one had ever asked me this question before. A few items from the castle had been delicious, but...food that made me happy?

"My mother used to make potato soup." My hand mindlessly slid over my thigh, where I usually wore something with pockets deep enough to carry a special stone. My heart twinged in my chest. Warm meals at our dinner table, just the three of us. I supposed that was the last time I'd been truly happy. My mouth worked into a smile as tears pricked my eyes at the nearly forgotten memory.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to upset you," Jasper said, slightly scrambling for what to do next.

I shook my head, dragging a knuckle under my eye to wipe away the evidence of my vulnerability. I'd built a carefully constructed dam throughout the years, but the pressure against it was mounting. This situation was all too overwhelming. Nearly everything about this capture hadn't been the usual routine, which I guessed I was grateful for. But that in itself had alarms blaring in my mind. "Excuse me."

Unable to remain under their watchful eyes for a moment longer, I sprinted to my room.

Dante

I joined Calista and Jasper in the parlor, the sun barely visible through the dawning night.

"So, any more thoughts on how to focus her magic?" Jasper asked, keeping his voice low so it wouldn't carry down the hall.

I nodded at Calista. "Maybe check to see how the edge of the forest is doing? Bringing her into town today could have done something already."

Calista got up and retrieved her crystal ball with its brass encompassed base from the cabinet hutch. I swiped the game board clear of its pieces and she set it in the middle. She raised her palms, hovering them above while she closed her eyes. Her hands traced intrinsic circles over the glass globe, and shortly after, a cloud of blue fogged the once see-through crystal.

It swirled, unfurling in the center to reveal a vision of the same part of the forest we'd peered into before—the opening into Witches Pass. Heavy disappointment crashed over me as we watched writhing black streams infiltrate the ground and rock.

"I think it's spread," Jasper noted, fear riddled in his voice.

Calista lowered her hands, slapping them onto her thighs while relinquishing a sigh.

I resonated on the situation. "Maybe we tell her."

Jasper and Calista shot their surprised gazes my way.

"You sure, King?" Jasper asked.

I wasn't. We had one shot at this, but I couldn't fight the guilt taking root in my soul.

Calista spoke, "There's still a lot we don't know about her blessing. I've never heard of magic like hers. Blessings can be fickle, unlike bloodborn magic."

For some reason, the hairs on my spine stood on end, and I couldn't contain the outburst. "You think I don't fucking know that?" My irritation settled in the air, all of us clearly finding it heavy to sit in. My snout scrunched and twitched, and I had to hold in a snarl. Dragging my paws over my face, I heaved out a loud sigh. I shouldn't be getting defensive. Evenita's words echoed in my memory, *mind your beast, boy*.

Calista squared her shoulders in her chair. "The girl hasn't even opened up enough to give us her name. I have a feeling if we outright asked for her to spill about magic she's been used for all her life to a group of strangers, she wouldn't tell."

"How long do we wait, though?" Jasper asked calmly.

Realizing how much tension I'd created, I dropped my shoulders and blew out a steady breath. "This seemed so much easier in theory. Now we've got a girl with bars on her door down the hall, and I don't know how to cope with that."

"I get it," Calista said. "The pressure is fucking suffocating."

Jasper nodded in agreement.

The world could look so very different if she achieved what I'd brought her here to do. Everything I'd brought her here to do...

Calista said, "Let's eat and sleep on it. Tomorrow, we'll take her to see Marxia and maybe she'll volunteer some information about her magic if she sees others wielding. She didn't even know we possessed magic. I should have mentioned it sooner. Highcrest has done a real fucking good job of making people ashamed of wielding. Maybe her seeing that it's accepted here will help her feel comfortable to wield." She rose from the chesterfield, making her way to the kitchen.

"I'll go let her know it's time for dinner," Jasper said, rising from the couch.

"No," my reply came out blunt and quick. "I'll get her." I hoped they wouldn't notice the lack of control I seemed to have over that response.

Jasper paused, but then tilted his head in agreement before he and Calista headed through the dining room toward the kitchen. I began down the hall.

Approaching silently in case she'd fallen asleep, I peered into her room. She lay in her bed, reading. Based on her page

position, I could see she'd almost finished. I stepped into view and asked, "Did you read that entire thing?"

Her body jerked as she gasped.

I released a soft chuckle. "Sorry, I didn't mean to startle you. I came to let you know it's time for dinner."

"Alright." She rose from the bed, sliding her delicate feet into the slippers on the floor. Sadness weighed down her voice, and that beating thing in my chest clenched into something tight.

"Do you *want* to join us?"

She paused, lifting her gaze wearily toward me. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, it's up to you. You don't have to. I can bring you a plate if you'd rather." I'd heard what happened earlier; scented her salty tears in the air.

"You're letting me choose?" she clarified, a line fixed between her brows.

"Yes."

Her stare lingered on the flames in her fireplace before she finally said, "I'd like to be alone."

I swallowed the lump of guilt in my throat. "Of course." Without saying anything further, I returned to the kitchen and prepared her a plate. It was Calista I sent to deliver it, though. Unable to bear seeing the truth in the girl's eyes, the one that conveyed she didn't want to be here.

The thing was, I couldn't even blame her.

I'd told Calista to lock her in for the night, which left me free to flee into the darkened woods. Amongst the barren trees and rotting land, I could exist as I was. No pretenses to who I was trying to be. My claws dug into my palms, shame boiling under my skin. Just a while longer, I told myself, and she would be free.

I would be free.

We all would be.

Mira

Among the array of fabrics, I started to learn which pieces I preferred. Patterns, lace work, ribbons, I avoided all of those. Continually, I returned to the simple dresses. The ones that would simply drape over a body, not tug or try to conform.

All of us had traveled here, but the king and Jasper had plans and departed swiftly.

Calista and Marxia discussed payment, which I tried to ignore since it sounded increasingly sexual. I kept my eyes pinned to the clothes, trying to give them privacy. A blush crept over my cheeks. They spoke so freely and openly about it with each other, neither hiding behind any walls of protection. Laying their desires bare before each other.

I worked down the bundle knotting in my throat. Never had I experienced a romantic connection. Part of me knew there'd been a longing for it in my soul, to find someone that would make me feel safe, seen, accepted. Loved.

“Any luck over there?” Calista called from the bar she leaned against in Marxia’s living room. This entire cottage was one open space, and I scoured the racks that lined the back wall.

“Yes,” I said meekly, plucking the soft pink long-sleeved dress off the hanger. I started walking toward them when Marxia interrupted me.

“Ah ah. Pick two. I have to travel with all of that to Highcrest next week since no one is buying here. The less I have to lug around, the better. Besides, I’ve had that particular dress for years and no one’s bitten yet. It has a twin, the light blue to the left there.” She signaled with a pointing finger.

I glanced over my shoulder, pinpointing the spring sky blue piece identical to the one in my hand. My heart did a funny flutter when I beheld the two beautiful pieces now on my arm.

“Excellent. I had a feeling my style wasn’t to your taste.” Calista grinned as I approached, eyeing the burlap matching set of hers I still wore.

“If you call that *style*,” Marxia chided.

“Hey,” Calista snapped.

“It’s fine. You never have them on for long, anyway.” Marxia gripped Calista’s chin between her fingers and leaned over the bar, pressing a kiss to her lips.

“Speaking of hot, the dresses aren’t the only reason I brought her here. She saw your performance at the market. Coming from Highcrest, she doesn’t see things like that very often. Thought you could give her a private show,” Calista said to the dressmaker.

The woman with a headful of light brown, fraying braids anchored herself in her living room and began morphing balls of fire into all kinds of shapes. At one point, she created a bird purely from flame, and had it flap its wings and fly above our heads. Each creation only lasted a few seconds before it dissipated into smoke.

It was captivating. Displays of magic were so uncommon in Highcrest, I often felt like I was the only one who had it. Though my power differed greatly from renderings of flaming birds, lifting objects with my mind, or looking like an inhuman creature turning to stone, I felt less different.

After a dozen or so, Marxia’s face glistened. She threw herself onto the sofa across from where Calista and I sat.

“Are you alright?” I asked, blinking in alarm. I’d never seen someone strain from magic.

Marxia waved her hand languidly in the air. “This is why I usually stick with basic shapes. They don’t drain me quite as fast.”

Calista faced me. “Magic has a well. Maybe they used to be deeper, when the bloodlines were stronger, but it depletes when used. Bloodborn magic wielders, anyway.”

Her words were pointed. Somehow, she knew my magic wasn’t inherited. I didn’t know how she could tell. I became increasingly more uncomfortable, just like how I’d felt under Prince Marco’s scrutiny.

With a twist of Calista’s fingers, a glass of water from the bar top floated through the air and Marxia grabbed it, downing the

entire thing. Calista inhaled deeply through her nose before saying, “Well, I think we’re going to head home. Thanks again, Marx.”

Marxia sighed loudly. “Thanks, doll. Make sure to visit me before I go.”

Calista tossed a wink in her direction before rising from the sofa. She peered at me. “Ready?”

I nodded and thanked the dressmaker before we left. For more than just the gifted clothes, but I kept that to myself.



Dante



After I'd pulled Hu aside to ask him for a favor, we rejoined Alaina and Jasper at the bakery stand. Minutes crept toward opening hours and it seemed more booths remained unattended to.

"This isn't a good sign," I observed.

"Yeah, already we've been told another flour shipment won't make it," Alaina said. Whereas Hu had stark white hair, his sister's was dark as night. Their piercing blue eyes were identical, though.

Jasper slid his gaze to me, but didn't comment. I knew it weighed on him to keep The Coveted a secret from his partner, but the three of us had agreed before setting out to retrieve her that the fewer people involved, the better.

She'd been in our possession for a few days now, and the curse only seemed to be progressing.

"Ah, open yet?" A male voice came from behind me. A strange scent masked by a floral aroma hit my nose before I turned to see the man it belonged to.

Sleek, shiny, straight black hair that fell to the man's tailored waist was the first thing I'd noticed. His eyes were so dark against his pale skin that I questioned if they were black instead of brown.

Jasper's enthusiastic features dropped into flat and joyless. "Marvoe," he greeted with no hint of welcome.

Ah, this is him.

"Hi Marvoe, what can I get for you?" Hu asked while wiping his hands on his stained apron.

"Oh, you know I love anything you make," the man crooned.

Jasper's complaints rang true, this man *was* a shameless flirt. The gargoyle refused to break eye contact, crossing his arms in a way that expanded his frame while he peered down at the witch. "Of course you do."

"Jasper." The man inclined his head toward Jasper, but didn't bother glancing in his direction.

Jasper flashed a fake smile before his features fell again. My senses peaked, a new lightness floating in the air. I turned to see Calista and The Coveted approaching. She remained mostly hidden under the hood, but still, her beauty shone through.

"I'll see you later, Hu. Bye, Alaina," Jasper said, stepping around Marvoe in a dramatic fashion, as if touching the man would make him ill.

"Bye, love," Hu replied. Alaina waved.

Jasper met Calista and the girl, and I moved with him.

"Oo, look at what we have here." Jasper grabbed the pretty garments from the girl's hand, holding them up in assessment.

"You're looking at the first dresses our girl here has ever picked out for herself." Calista folded her arms, a smirk creasing her lips.

Jasper released a low whistle. The girl smiled faintly, and my chest burned at the sight. Leaving her and Calista alone had taken more effort than I cared to admit. This girl's magic had a powerful draw.

"Good choices! Up top, girlfriend." Jasper held his hand up.

The girl's smile pulled to one side, and she lit up as she gave him a high five. Jasper wrapped his fingers around her hand and shook it. "Look at you, stretching your stylistic wings." He flared his own behind him before tucking them tight.

Her hood slipped from the jostling motion, revealing those tumbling bright red curls that perfectly framed her serene face. I found it hard to look away.



Hu and Jasper had been in the kitchen for nearly an hour. Calista had gone out for the evening, a dalliance with Marxia no doubt.

The Coveted had returned to her room, and I let her decompress. If what Calista said was true, this woman had never been given a real life. Which was something I probably should have considered, seeing as how she'd been kept behind bars. I hadn't even questioned it. Caught up in my drunken lust with the idea that her power could save us had my rational thoughts fleeing.

"Soup's on!" Jasper called from the kitchen.

At that, I left the parlor and walked to her bedroom. The cell door remained open, and she was reading on her bed. When she saw me, she closed the book and sat up.

"I don't want to disturb your reading, but dinner is ready." I steeled my nerves and continued, "And I'd really like for you to join us tonight. It's still your call, though, I just..." I refrained from saying anything more. She didn't need me guilt tripping her.

"Okay," she said, sliding her feet into the slippers I'd left that first night.

The steady drumbeat in my chest picked up its rhythm as we headed to the kitchen. Would she be happy with it? Evenita had the ingredients, and Hu was a phenomenal cook. But would it resemble what she remembered? I let her lead the way.

"Welcome! Please, have a seat. You're in for a real treat. Hu is the best cook in Argora Vale," Jasper said, sliding out a barstool for the girl to sit at.

"Hello," Hu said to her while he plunged the ladle into the simmering pot.

"Hi," she greeted, chewing on her bottom lip, her fingers running through the ends of her hair that gathered over one shoulder. She glanced at me, a flash of concern in her eyes, like silent pleading. I didn't understand why.

"I'm sorry, I didn't catch your name before. Jasper needs another lesson in manners, I suspect," Hu joked, tossing a glance at his partner.

Jasper and I stilled. I hadn't informed her we'd be having a guest, and something about it made her outwardly uncomfortable. I cut in, "She's shy. That smells good, Hu, thanks for making it." I protectively placed my hand over the girl's back, guiding her to her seat. Silent reassurance.

We sat at the table, and Jasper doled out our bowls.

"Potato soup!" he exclaimed, placing it before her. He paused, the act clearly an opening for her to have a reaction.

I waited, too. I hoped that by asking Hu to make this, it would help her feel more at home. Help her open up to the idea of blessing us. Sensing her sadness earlier in the day had taken my heart and crumpled it like a piece of paper.

Her heavy eyes lifted to him. "You made this...for me?"

My heart broke hearing the disbelief in her voice.

"Of course!" Jasper said.

Hu cleared his throat. Loudly.

"Sorry. Hu made this for you." He flashed an innocent smile.

"I...That was very thoughtful." She had a hard time getting the words out. Her gaze wandered to the soup before her, and she sighed, one of awe.

A spark of something I might have once recognized as joy lit my soul.

"Is that all you're going to have, King?" Jasper asked.

I glanced down at my human sized bowl, at least one tenth my normal portion size. "Yes."

This was a meal for her. I wouldn't rob her of more portions if she chose them.

"Mira," the girl said.

Quiet fell over us as we all looked at her.

My heart stalled.

"My name. It's Mira."



I raked my claws through my fur. "We should take her to the palace."

Calista and Jasper stood with me outside after dinner, under the darkness of nightfall. The chickens were peaceful in their enclosure despite my frantic, stilted pacing.

"Yeah?" he asked.

I flexed my fingers. "Clearly her magic isn't working." Or my desires were too split for it to pinpoint.

"I agree. She revealed nothing today with Marxia," Calista added.

Transparency; that was what I wanted to give Mira. Explain the reason I'd brought her here.

“So it’s settled. Tomorrow, we lay our cards on the table. Ask for her help,” I said, huffing into the cold winter air. I drowned out the sounds of battle that waged in my head.



Mira



After Calista unlocked my door and I took myself to the bathroom, I reentered the hall pooling with morning sunlight to find the hulking wolf creature and half-stone man tinkering with my cage door.

I kept my head down and walked toward the kitchen. As my steps drifted over the wooden floors and carpet runners, I reflected on the night previous.

I'd volunteered my name.

Something warm and all-encompassing had hugged my soul, and I'd let my barriers melt away.

With hands clasped around my arms, I stepped down into the kitchen. The room was empty. I'd expected Calista to be in here making breakfast. Without something cooking, a strange tang coated the air.

The back door swung open, and Calista sauntered in, basket full of eggs in hand. "Oh hey, good morning. Where are the guys?" she asked as she kicked off the snow on the doorframe before setting the basket on the island.

"In the hall," I said, hands rubbing my arms to protest the breeze that'd wafted in.

"You like it?" Calista asked without looking in my direction.

I didn't understand what she meant.

She removed her coat, hanging it on a hook near the back wall before turning her attention to me. "The dress."

I looked upon the beautiful, soft pink dress I'd changed into. A smile curved my lips. "Yes, very much. Thank you."

"You hungry?" She began unloading the eggs, dunking them briefly in a bowl of water before setting them on the countertop.

"I am. Do you mind if I join?" I nodded to the island.

"By all means." Surprise and maybe a flash of delight sparked across her blue eyes.

Soon, the room filled with the aroma of seasoned eggs, and Calista went to retrieve the guys. When she returned, she had a knowing smile on her face, though she tried to avoid eye contact with me. Jasper waltzed in next.

"Good morning, Mira. Did you sleep well?" It sounded like the only reason he'd asked was to use my name in a sentence.

For some reason, my stomach didn't tense in discomfort. "I did. Did you?" I volleyed back the question.

Calista and Jasper brought their gazes to the kitchen doorway, still wearing smiles. I turned to see the beast standing there, focusing on me.

"Can I show you something?" he asked.

I glanced briefly at the witch and the gargoyle, but they suddenly found their everyday kitchen appliances very interesting.

I nodded and slipped off the barstool before following him back through the manor.

He stopped at my room. Extending a grizzly-like paw, he directed my attention to the locking mechanism.

It had moved.

"We already got rid of the old door, so this is the best I can do for now." He retrieved the key from the small hallway table and held it out toward me.

I glanced between the altered lock and the key, then into his earthy eyes. "I don't understand," I admitted.

"We rotated the door. It no longer locks from the outside. Only the inside."

A rising tide of emotions and questions swelled within me. I delicately plucked the key from his grasp.

"Mira, I'd like to show you something else today. Will you come?" he asked, desperation and hope glimmering in his eyes. How could I say no?



An excursion, Jasper had called it. Taking the same wagon as before, we headed in a different direction than we'd taken to the markets—though they didn't tell me where. Or why. There'd been a strange silence that'd wrapped around all three of them, an obvious withholding of information.

My nerves began building then.

Calista and I sat in the back of the flatbed, blankets littered over us as their king pulled the cart. Jasper walked beside and periodically flew ahead. The constant rock and sway of the cart did nothing to loosen my worries.

"I'm going to be making a trip into Highcrest after we get back. Is there anything you want?" Calista said, breaking the silence we'd been in for over an hour, judging by the sun.

I thought back to the castle. To Clint's cabin. To the small apartment above the worship hall. A dozen other places came to mind, all creating a sinkhole in my chest. When I thought of Highcrest, I thought of bars. Locked rooms. Of armored guardsmen and scheming princes.

"No," I answered. Was there even anything for me to want? I had no anchor, no home. No routine, or favorite place.

"Nothing? Not a single thing?" she pressed.

Something akin to embarrassment flickered within over the fact that I had nothing to ask for. Evidence of a life with nothing. "Are you not afraid of the ogres?" I asked, changing the subject.

"Nah. I don't travel on foot. That'd be suicide."

I rose an eyebrow. "Then how do you travel?"

"By flying gargoyle." Her smile spread. "He drops me off near the border, then I walk the rest of the way. He waits for me to finish, then we fly home." She stretched her legs under her blanket, bundling the top portion under her neck.

"What are you going to get?" I asked, purely for distraction.

Wherever we were going, I felt the looming weight of it press upon my shoulders. Just as I'd felt when I thought Prince Nicholas would reveal why he'd brought me in the gardens that day.

"Supplies are running low here. Any little bit helps." She shrugged a shoulder and set her gaze on the passing forest. "Highcrest should be helping anyway." Bitterness laced her tone, accentuated by the line formed between her brows.

"I didn't even know anyone lived here," I admitted quietly.

"Hardly anyone does," she said with an exaggerated sigh. She stretched her neck, glancing around. "We're almost there." Tossing off the blanket, she kicked it away and jumped out of the moving wagon.

I sat up, taking in our surroundings. In the distance, a building came into view. Jasper flew overhead, landing beside Calista. "Clear," he said.

I wasn't sure I wanted to know what it was clear of.

The beast stopped, setting the cart down. I had a hard time getting my muscles to cooperate. Frozen, but not by the cold. The beast walked to the flatbed, paws extended for me to place myself in his hold.

I couldn't refrain from looking into his eyes, fear and trepidation probably dripping from my gaze.

"I promise you're safe. Trust me."

Those words rocked me. Trust? I'd never learned what that meant in another person—or creature. The only thing I could ever trust in was the repeating cycle inflicted upon me by a so-called blessing.

I stared at his steady, enormous paws as they reached for me. Then I lifted my eyes to meet his. I swam in the depths of emotions that lurked behind his golden brown irises. Sorrow, desperation, guilt. The subtle droop of his gaze and the way he studied me melted my hesitation. I truly didn't believe he would hurt me.

Maybe this would be the biggest mistake of my life, but I rose to enter his grasp. Those paws that I once thought possessed lethal force now became a warm embrace—one that I welcomed.

He was steady. Secure. I couldn't recall a time when I didn't flinch or hesitate when another person touched me. But with him, and his protective hold...

I almost didn't want him to let me go when he lowered me to the ground. I might have imagined it, but I swore the look in his eyes said he didn't want to let me go either. I swallowed this unfamiliar feeling as I peered into his deep, dark eyes.

His thumb barely extended to stroke my side in a soft caress.

I sucked in a wisp of air. His lingering embrace finally fell, and when it did, I found myself missing it.

"I want to show you why you're here," he said, encouraging me to keep pace with him as he moved forward.

I'd had a suspicion that's what today would entail. For nearly the entire ride up here I'd worried about it. My bottom lip throbbed from where my teeth had clamped down so firmly.

We walked through the undisturbed snow that sprawled across a massive plot of land, and tucked away at its center, a palace. Not one in use, no, it looked as if no one tread these lands in years. Decades. Possibly a century.

Jasper did another lap of the perimeter from above, and Calista followed beneath. The closer we got, the more apparent it became; the palace had been struck with a deadly blast. Soot stained spots of impact on the walls, crumbled stone scattered as rubble. Part of the second floor had caved where a massive portion of the wall had come down.

Rotting foliage, snow, and whatever other dirty remnants layered what was once probably a gorgeous ballroom. Through creeping vines I could see ornate details along the walls and doorways. None of the others stepped into the building, so we only observed from the outside.

Slowly, they led me around the building, but no one spoke a word. Silently, it seemed we paid our respects to the fallen structure, making our way around until another building appeared.

The entire roof had shattered. I think it had been made of glass. The world's biggest greenhouse judging by the size of it. Rows of benches and pots held black, withered roots that draped onto the floor, as if they'd tried crawling to find escape.

Snow blanketed the ground, but I could see where black wisps reached up onto the buildings. Beneath us lay a labyrinth of black veins, the ones that'd spread the infectious curse, destroying anything in its path.

"This was Argora Vale's Palace. A century ago, it fell to dark magic that no one knew how to fight," the beast said.

This ghostly place echoed with loss. Where life once thrived, nothing but a few broken pieces remained. My soul resonated with that.

"An entire kingdom," Calista whispered, reverence and sorrow cushioning her words.

"It's surging again," the beast continued.

My gaze jumped to him. "What?" History stated magic persecution started after this kingdom had been destroyed. Though not a trace of dark magic had been found elsewhere, fear still sullied hearts in the surrounding kingdoms.

The beast pointed to the black veins that crawled along the rocks. "Magic just like that is encroaching on the kingdom. Not here, in the east. The land beneath it decays on contact and it's destroyed the kingdom's largest crop fields."

"That's why food supplies are dwindling. Being cut off from the other kingdoms, there's no other resources to lean on," Calista added.

"It's spreading, Mira."

My gaze drifted to the beast, whose tender eyes were solely focused on me.

No, no. Not this. Anything but this.

"We brought you here to cure the curse. Stop it from spreading." His fists curled at his sides. The snow at his feet shifted from where his claws dug in.

I can't.

They'd brought me here to quell dark magic, thinking because they desired it, it could be done. My chest cleaved in two.

"There's not much we know about it besides the fact that it kills everything it touches. We've been doing the best we can to ease the effects, but it's only going to grow worse. Unless we figure something else out, the kingdom will run out of resources and viable land until eventually we're all pushed into the other kingdoms."

"And I think you've seen how kindly those folks take to magic wielders, let alone creatures who look like these two." Calista gestured to the beast and the dot flying in the sky still on patrol.

"Will you help us?" the beast asked.

"Gods." The word rushed out on a shaky breath. I'd never been more devastated that my magic didn't work the way the rumors suggested. If ever there were a time it was needed, this would be it.

But I didn't have magic that could fight whatever caused dark magic to reappear.

"There are temple ruins nearby. Would you like to see them?" Calista asked, her and the beast exchanging uncomfortable glances.

A temple. Argora Vale's temple, said to once be the shining beacon the gods placed on the earth. I'd learned that from the cleric's books on church history. To see the once great home of the gods had me considering they'd led me here today.

My head spun, the king's question still hovering in the brisk winter air. "Yes," was all I could manage to say.

Without a word, Calista nodded for me to follow, and she headed across the blank, snowy canvas. I couldn't bring myself to look back at the beast, though I heard him trailing behind.

This entire kingdom was going to fall. All its inhabitants forced to flee. Highcrest didn't have any laws against magic wielders, but I'd seen enough to know they wouldn't be received well. Windguard, the kingdom on the other side of the dividing river and mountains, *did* have actual laws against magic wielders. The population of bloodborn witches here with their revealing eyes wouldn't be welcome anywhere on the continent.

And then what? What happened if they somehow managed to settle? Would the curse only infect Argora Vale as it had a century ago? Or would it continue spreading until even Highcrest fell to its poison?

A wide spanning mountain range separated Argora Vale and Windguard now, but they'd said the curse was surging from the east. Had it crossed the border? Was that kingdom also dealing with this new scourge? I couldn't imagine so, or else the Prince of Highcrest would know surely about it.

Besides reports from fleeing refugees, there'd been no news regarding the kingdom who purged magic wielders. At least, not that had circulated, anyway. But I'd been in the castle, and surely would have overheard something had the prince known.

Questions with no trove of answers plagued my mind for the half an hour or so we traveled.

When my eyes fell upon the deserted structure, I wanted to weep.

Once a temple of pure elegance and devotion stood here. Now, it was nothing more than a tomb, a husk of forsaken gods.

“Can I...” I asked, my words trailing before I could manage to work them out.

Calista nodded. “Just don’t touch anything.”

I carried myself to the cracked stone steps and walked atop the slanting plane. Giant columns still supported the withering structure, but time had not been kind to the once respected temple. Color that should have been bright and clean now looked worn and dingy.

I stepped across the threshold where marble statues lay decimated across the mosaic floor before the piled snow in the middle could cover them all. Cold seeped further into my bones as a lone breeze filtered through.

Hollow.

I thought I might feel some sort of connection here, discover a purpose for why they’d brought me all this way. Instead of standing before former versions of the immortal gods, I stood in the presence of knowledge that doomed all the souls on the continent with no way to help.

Unless...

Unless I did choose to help.

I may not have the power to grant desires by the snap of my fingers, but I did possess something of value.

I refused to let the notion stand that this was all for nothing. Connection to the gods or not, this wasn’t over. And if it did happen to be the end of everything, at least I would have tried to do something with the shit hand I’d been dealt.

On determined feet, I waltzed back outside before stopping on the porch of the temple.

“Yes,” I said, my breath clouding the air before me.

“Yes...what?” Calista asked, hands gripping her elbows as she stood off to the side with the beast.

When his gaze locked with mine, I knew he understood before I even said the words.

“Yes. I’ll help.”




Mira




At the temple, I'd considered revealing that the persona of The Coveted was essentially a hoax. My skin broke out in a cold sweat even now just thinking of the possibility. I'd ingrained secrecy into the very fabric of my being, swore I'd never reveal the truth.

But that decision was always so I would stay safe. Maybe it was foolish on my part, but I highly doubted they'd treat me poorly if I confessed.

Still, I couldn't stop myself from worrying about what would follow. Unexplored territory it would be for my captors to know the truth, and even if I felt safe to share, how long would they tolerate me? Would they allow me to stay within their walls, eating their food that grew more precarious to acquire every passing day? What would await me in this foreign kingdom if I had to leave? Or worse, return to Highcrest...

No, I couldn't let the words spill from my lips. I tried to rationalize that it wasn't selfish, given that I could still possibly find a way to help.

Maybe the truth was I simply didn't want to go...

Their energy shift had been like nothing I'd ever experienced before. It caused a bit of guilt to stir in my soul, to see them so happy over something I couldn't grant.

Jasper's wings fluttered with excitement every few minutes before he'd take off into the sky, spinning wildly while shouting with joy.

Even the way the beast held and hauled the flatbed looked less tense. Calista had started listing the items she wanted to snag from Highcrest on her trip, an assortment of wine now added to the list.

I couldn't blame her—the wine certainly was delicious.

I found myself sinking back into my rehearsed tactics, remaining silent. Only this time, a steady smile remained.



We arrived back at the manor. My body had become sore from sitting on that flat wood for hours, so I retreated to my room. I stoked the fire and crawled under the sheets, book in hand. Finding it difficult to concentrate on the words on the page, my thoughts wandered.

Of all the times I'd wished for my powers to just do what people expected, the consequences of being unable to now felt the most punishing.

These creatures were suffering. An entire kingdom—led by a ferocious beast, their king—on the verge of starvation. I'd watched Prince Nicholas refuse to help his people when he had all the resources in the world.

That still left a bitter taste in my mouth.

But the beast, he didn't have much at all. There was no manor staff to maintain it, no lavish meals with a grand audience. The residents here took it upon themselves to help one another, putting in the labor that would sustain their neighbors.

This kingdom had long been forsaken by the world. We'd thought the curse destroyed everything, leaving only a few man-eating creatures behind. But a kingdom had survived.

Recalling what the beast looked like at the market among his people, how he stood out from his sheer size, made sense why he'd been chosen to rule. Though, *rule* didn't seem like an appropriate descriptor.

Nicholas ruled. Sitting on an elevated throne, above the people. Meant to oversee their welfare, but instead left them in

desperate circumstance.

The beast supported. Recognized the needs of the creatures under his care, and took it upon himself to meet them.

At first, I thought Nicholas had done that, but as the weeks went on, it was clear I was there for show. A morale boost, I think he'd called it on one occasion. A way for the people to hold on to hope without holding him entirely responsible for what he withheld.

I sunk my teeth into my bottom lip. I was now well and truly in uncharted territory. The focus was no longer merely to survive, but to employ my actual gift. Generally, it worked without me having any say in the matter, but this, this needed to be deliberate.

Silence wouldn't be how I succeeded. I needed to do the opposite. *Be* the opposite of everything I'd ever been before.

Time for a new role.



A couple hours passed, and as if I could sense the time, I waited for those beastly feet stalking the hall. I closed the book and put on my slippers. A moment later, canine eyes peered at me from the open cage door.

“Would you like to j—” he started.

“Yes,” I said before he was able to finish. He reared back in surprise.

I shot to my feet. “What are we having?”

He blinked once. Twice. His mouth worked to say something, but remained wordless.

“Is there anymore potato soup?” I asked, looking at him from under my lashes.

His throat worked down whatever words had clogged it. “Yes, there’s some left over, if that’s what you’d like.”

“I would,” I said, an honest smile crossing my lips.

I followed him to the kitchen, giving myself an internal pep talk. Once the food had all been prepped, the four of us sat down together at the dining room table.

“So, how long have you led the kingdom?” I asked the beast, taking the first sip of creamy soup.

Calista froze, jaw open, in the middle of bringing a forkful to her mouth. Jasper’s chewing slowed until the bulge in his cheek stayed still.

“What?” Calista narrowed her eyes as she angled toward me, confusion settling on her brow.

“How long have you been the king of this kingdom?” I scoured their stares, wondering why I’d needed to clarify.

Jasper burst out laughing, despite trying to hold it in, and bits of food went flying. Calista got hit with food shrapnel and made a sound of disgust as she wiped at her face.

The grin on the beast’s face spread as wide as I’d ever seen it. A notch formed in my heart at the sight of happiness on his face.

“What?” I questioned, shooting everyone at the table a look.

“King is a nickname, not a title,” the beast answered, making me realize I’d made a fool of myself.

“Can you imagine this guy being a *king*!?” Calista pointed her thumb at the beast, and her and Jasper roared out more laughter.

“My name is Dante.”

We locked eyes.

Dante. My gaze danced between his two brown eyes. I almost questioned if I’d heard him right. It was such a human name. As I stared at the light glimmering in his eyes, it felt as though I could see behind them. Into his soul.

“The last *actual* king was named Dante, so I lovingly bestowed the nickname.” Jasper held a satisfied look of pride.

“Yeah, I definitely didn’t ask for it,” Dante said.

“You didn’t have to, that’s what friends are for!” Jasper quipped. “Feel free to give him your own nickname, Mira. Whatever comes to mind! He won’t bite.”

“I call him puppy sometimes,” Calista added with a beaming smile.

At that moment, Dante picked up his spoon. Before him sat a bowl of potato soup that I’d insisted he have after he’d mentioned they’d been saving what remained for me.

My heart exploded with feelings I’d never felt. Laughter came pouring out of me, tears with it. But not the kind I’d been used to. They weren’t heavy, filled with regret or pain. They were light and freeing.

For a moment, they all looked at me like I’d suddenly morphed into a creature from The Cursed Kingdom. Despite their gazes, I couldn’t stop. This beast, whom I’d once thought would eat me in the woods, held a human sized spoon in his

overgrown paw, had cared for me when the cold became too much, switched the locks on my door in a display of trust no one had ever shown me before, and he'd taken me to save a kingdom.

He had friends that gave him nicknames, and by suggesting I gave him one, it meant I had somehow joined this little clique of outcasts. My laughter had gone silent, to the point my shoulders were shaking. No sound came out until I gasped to catch my breath before rolling into more laughter.

I guess it'd become infectious because suddenly we were all laughing. Something about being here, in this manor, with these creatures, brightened my dulled spirit. Like I had been a puzzle piece with holes missing on my sides, and this place filled them.

Mira

I awoke in my room, a new sense of life dwelling in my heart. Last night, after dinner and that laughing attack I'd instigated, we'd all retired to the parlor. I had even tried my hand at my first game of Druids & Horseshoes—with a lot of help from Calista, who was supposed to be my opponent.

Today, my purpose had been renewed. I had a plan to implement this morning, and it didn't feel daunting or difficult anymore. Out of habit, I almost kept myself waiting for someone to retrieve me until my eyes fell upon the moved lock mechanism.

I slid the key off the mantel and unlocked the bolt. The resounding thud battered against the protective barrier I'd been forced to build around myself. I didn't need to lock it last night, but something about the option, the power, the control, sang in my bones for me to exercise this new muscle.

The cage swung into the hall, and with my first step, the pace of my heart increased. The world had changed overnight, and I hated that the desire to dash back into my room infiltrated my determination.

But Dante stepped into view at the end of the hallway, and when my eyes met his, my worries melted.

"Good morning," he said, his voice trailing down the corridor. Morning light filtered around him through the stained glass foyer windows, casting a glow over his furry silhouette.

"Hi," I said, my feet already bringing me closer.

"How did you sleep?" he asked.

"I was wondering..." Before I lost my nerve, I had to solidify my plans.

He stilled. "Anything." It came out in a whisper, his gaze sculpting the waves in my hair.

He looked at me in a way I'd never seen. Butterflies flitted through my chest. "I'd like to spend some time in the garden, maybe go for a walk, and...I'd like you to join me." Why was my heart racing?

The weight of that assessing brown gaze had my cheeks heating. Nerves over my ploy or something like anticipation, I wasn't sure.

"Of course," he finally replied after what felt like minutes.

I darted back to my room and dressed for the weather. When we got to the kitchen door, Dante opened it, stepping back for me to leave first. He'd done it at that cottage we'd stopped at before, too. It wasn't an act filled with impatience, but something more of respect and kindness.

It surprised me that it didn't surprise me.

My boots stepped onto the already packed down snow, trails left behind from their foot traffic. Obviously, I could tell which were Dante's tracks and which were Calista's and Jasper's. Their path veered off to the tucked corner near the edge of the manor, leading to a sheltered chicken coup.

The back property sprawled across snow covered terrain before sprouting to life into the tree-laden forest. I was sure in the summer there were details of the garden that I couldn't see now, but under the snow, it all looked the same. In case any flowers had a chance to spring up, I didn't want to step where a patch would bloom. I turned to him for direction. "Where do I go?"

"Wherever you want."

That answer pierced my heart.

He didn't utter an instruction for me to follow, or a limitation to obey. I cast my gaze over the unfenced property that led into the woods all around us.

No restrictions.

The forest didn't appear to be a dead thing now—it was something to explore. Left, right, straight—the decision was mine, wherever my heart longed to go. With a fearsome beast of the forest by my side, I had nothing to fear.

We'd left the previously created pathways, and every step sunk into the undisturbed mounds of white, deeper into the silent

woods. I paused, then took a giant leap. A giggle climbed out of my throat and into the uncaged wilderness surrounding us. Glancing over my shoulder, I beheld Dante. He watched me without judgment, and my task became easier.

“Thank you,” I began.

“You’re thanking me?”

“For this walk. I grew to enjoy walks in the garden. I took one every day at the castle. There hasn’t always been the opportunity for me to do so.” Sharing even this felt like exposing myself. I told myself to push through the discomfort. If remaining silent built barriers, surely speaking would break them down.

“This forest isn’t nearly as nice as Highcrest gardens.” He leaned against a tree, arms crossed before him.

“No. It’s better.” All amusement fell from my face. “There are no walls out here.” I spread my arms wide at my sides, taking in the expanse of the silent wood. My arms fell, and I slid into my new role.

“I received this blessing as a child. *The Coveted*.” The identifier thickened like ash in my mouth. Still, I pressed on. “I don’t think a day since then has been mine.” Whether or not I thought he would respond, the words barged their way through the gates like they’d been fighting to get out. Years of repression and intentional silence had met their end. As uncomfortable as it was to say them out loud, I could feel the power of it releasing its hold on me. A shovel plunging into the dirt, removing the layers I’d spent my life using to bury everything deep down, allowing my soul to breathe. The small rush was invigorating.

“Taken by one person or group after another, I haven’t had a day of freedom.” My lungs burned. From the exertion, frigid chill in the air, or the vulnerable admission, I couldn’t tell. But I no longer felt desperate to stop. I released a contemplative sigh. “Desire. One of the most dangerous traits of humanity, I’d argue. They allow anyone to justify the most abhorrent actions.”

My fists balled in my mittens as I braced to relive some of the most horrifying experiences of my life. “Have you ever watched someone die?”

Hot breath left his nostrils, forming temporary clouds, but he remained as stoic as the surrounding forest. My gaze dropped from him, suddenly unprepared to see any kind of reaction when I continued.

“I stopped counting. People would rather die than give up their opportunity for their deepest desires to be fulfilled. And since others were willing to kill for the same opportunity, that’s been the cycle. Whether for days, weeks, or months, it almost always ends the same.”

I returned my gaze to him. “But never once have I been taken to help others.” Our stares locked on to each other, like a lifeline.

“I’ve never been given the opportunity to help for the right reasons.” Warm tears pooled in my eyes. “And I want to thank you for that, too.”

I hadn’t shared the realities of my life with anyone before, not since my first few captors. Desperation as a naïve child.

This time, I wasn’t trying to bargain for my freedom. Maybe that’s why everything came out so easily. That, and whatever it felt like to be around him. Protected. Secure. Safe.

I hadn’t planned on sharing those personal details. I’d thought about telling him where I was born, where I’ve lived. Details about my life that would encourage him to share details about his own.

Staring into Dante’s eyes, I questioned what I’d done. Maybe this plan wouldn’t work. After all, I had practically zero practice in the art of conversation. How could I expect to say just the right things to pry him open and get what I needed?

I didn’t know what I’d want to hear, but when nothing came, I felt a bitter taste of my own medicine. Instead of sitting in the stretching silence, I sighed and lowered myself to the ground. My arms and legs spread wide in the blanket of white fluff around me in sweeping motions. This was a memory I’d forgotten long ago.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

It was a fair question.

“Making a snow angel. My mother and father used to do this with me as a child during the winter months. They said if I made an angel, it would signal to the gods that I trusted them. Come, make one with me.”

Not a serious offer, but one meant to disarm him.

My frantic movements froze in place when, to my surprise, he walked over and lowered himself onto his back beside me without protest. I stared in amazement, mouth agape, and a smile formed on my lips. He copied my movements perfectly, not breaking his gaze with the cloudy gray sky above.

“You’ve done this before.” If hiding my utter shock had been my goal, I failed miserably.

He laughed into the air, the most unexpected and lovely sound giving life to these barren woods. Something warm and bright nested in my chest.

“There’s a lot you don’t know about me, green eyes.”

My heart plummeted like a fiery ball into my stomach. Having people reference my hair color had been common, but I couldn’t recall a time anyone noted my eyes.

Tearing my gaze away, I joined him, staring up at the sky. Without meaning to, I slid further into a place of comfort in his presence, and my mind wandered out loud.

“My mother had the same eyes. Every time I look at them in a mirror, I see her.” Instead of pain, a sense of calm blanketed

me. A piece of her that remained, now noticed by another. "Not too long ago, I ran into a witch at a market in Highcrest. She gifted me a stone, one that had greens as bright as the ones in my mother's eyes. When I'd hold it, I'd feel like she was with me."

My fingers swirled around the empty pocket of my cloak where the comforting weight should be. "It was actually the first thing I could keep with me. The only thing that became mine. Being swept away in a bloody massacre doesn't leave time for packing belongings."

"The night you took me from the castle, I had it on me, but at some point it got lost in the woods."

"I'm sorry, Mira." The guilt in his strained voice did something to me.

"I get why you did it. You were looking after your kingdom. Even if you aren't the *king*." I looked over at him with a cheeky smile, able to laugh at myself for it now.

His chest sunk with a partial laugh. Not like the one he let free a few minutes ago. I found myself disappointed he didn't do it again. The cold started to seep into my bones from laying in the snow, and I desperately wanted to sit by a warm, roaring fire.

"Was your mother a—uh—did she look like you?" I asked.

"No. She's not to blame for these good looks." His lip curled, revealing a pointed fang.

Soft, rolling laughter poured out of me. A wolf beast remarking on his own beauty—what was I supposed to even do with a comment like that?

"Come on, let's get you inside." As if somehow he sensed that I was minutes away from shivering relentlessly, he rose to his feet.

I attempted to maneuver out of my snow angel in a way that wouldn't disturb the outline. When I got to my feet, I peered down at the sight.

My normal snow angel next to an alarmingly huge one. Mesmerizing in its own way. To the residents of this forsaken kingdom, I supposed he was an angel, considering all he'd done for them, despite the way some glared or ran from his presence. They would be the ones to look at his ear prints in the snow and deem them horns. But I knew different.

I studied my own, hoping that the imprinted image I'd created could also hold true.

Maybe I could also be a saving angel for these people. Something amazing could come from this after all, as long as I remained by his side.

Dante

The back of her cape swayed as she walked through the kitchen, then into the dining room to go return her outdoor wear to her room.

Though she was in good spirits, her words clung to me, ripping into my chest and prying it open.

A lifetime of pain. And I thought *I'd* had it bad.

She'd had it worse.

So much so, that me not having fucking chains around her while she walked through a nearly decaying forest was grounds for her to *thank* me. And the way she looked at me when she thought saving the kingdom was all I wanted from her...

My stomach acid churned like hot lava.

Fuck. Somehow, I still proved to myself that I could never change. I'd always be a selfish monster.

Dragging myself into the sitting room, I slumped on the floor, facing Calista and Jasper's game.

"Everything good, King?" Calista furrowed her brow, assessing my sluggish demeanor.

"SHH." Jasper snapped, aggressively waving his hands to pair with the bossy instruction. He stared, deep in thought, as he made his next calculated move on the board.

"Really?" Calista's voice fell flat, eyes rolling to the ceiling.

Jasper leaned back, linking his hands behind his head with a smug grin slapped over his face. "Absolutely."

"Alright." Calista exhaled, then moved her piece without hesitating, as if she'd had time to consider every single option he could have made in the time it took him to decide his last move.

Jasper flew forward, eyes wide. "WHAT?! NO!"

"I told you, you were overthinking it!" she lectured.

Jasper stared at the board, replaying the entire thing, muttering to himself and pointing at past moves made.

"Oh, Alaina will be at the market tomorrow, running the stand. I need to go speak with her. I want to throw a little dinner party for Hu's and my anniversary in two days, and I need to practice. I'll leave before midday," Jasper mentioned, still intent on deciphering his loss.

"I should try to hunt again soon. I'm worried the game is spreading further west and it'll take me longer to track them down," I said, adding it to my list of concerns, but I couldn't bring myself to do it today. Not with the revelation of Mira, gods that was a beautiful name, saying she'd help us, and then hearing the horrors of her past. Leaving her felt...wrong.

"You should get that blood out of here, too. It's starting to stink up my kitchen," Calista said.

"Ew, yeah, I don't want that to taint any of my baking creations for Hu," Jasper added, scrunching his face.

"Yeah, *that's* what'll taint them." Calista tried eating her smile.

Jasper made some immature mocking mouth noises in return. Usually their playful back and forth lightened my mood, but today weighed heavy. I knew the blood needed to get out to the ogres within the next couple of days or it would spoil. Letting it expire would risk losing more wildlife unnecessarily. Curbing their hunger meant they didn't hunt the ever dwindling animal population.

I should leave with it today. The nagging of the task pricked under my skin, but I couldn't bring myself to leave her right now. In fact, sitting in this room while she was just down the hall putting away her cloak even seemed like too much distance.

Something pressed into me, telling me I owed her. That I had to find some way to try and make up for what I'd done.

A new internal battle waged.

How could I balance using her magic without using *her*?



Our evening unfolded the same as the previous one, Druids & Horseshoes in the parlor. I thought I could have gone the rest of my life without witnessing another game, but watching Mira learn to play, seeing her smile when she understood an obscure rule, brought new life to it.

None of us brought up the issue of the curse. She'd agreed she'd help, and though we didn't know how or when, we were content to accept the win and leave her to it. Maybe she was still adjusting and her magic just needed time.

As I lay in bed, staring at the ceiling, I sank into the current of conflicting thoughts running amok in my mind. How to untwist this tangled weave? I couldn't stop myself from reflecting on the night my life took a tragic turn.

"To Dante! One hell of a negotiator, but equally a scallywag who'll steal your gal!"

Cheers erupted from the crowd in the tavern. The smell of long ago spilt ale soaked the wood floor, brought back to life by the fires heating the space.

My back received multiple smacks of praise and adoration from a group of men, most of which I'd known my whole life. Any attempts previously to get permits for a gambling parlor in town had failed, but using my charismatic charm, I'd brokered a deal with the bank.

I wouldn't have any shares or stock in it, but they said if I could pull it off, I'd get to gamble once a week for free for the rest of my life. A challenge I'd gladly accepted. Fiddle music swept through the tavern, a few bodies dancing in a jig on the dance floor.

Spirits were high, and it felt like I held the entire world in my palm. A familiar black-haired damsel gracefully cut through the crowd, walking straight up to me. Those turquoise eyes always stole my attention.

Others cleared from her path, weary of a witch in their midst. Not me. I leaned against the bar top, a wicked smile curving my lips as she stalked toward me, knowing the reward I would reap tonight.

She removed her gloves, setting them on the counter beside me. "I see congratulations are in order," she crooned, her plush lips pursed out just a little, a play only I could see.

"They are. Any idea how you'll celebrate me?" I tugged on her hip, pulling her body close to mine, lightly grazing my lips over hers but never landing on the target.

"I think I have an idea," she playfully replied.

Blood rushed to my cock just thinking about the spirited night we would have. Bonnie and I always had a good time. I took a long swig of my ale, not finishing the glass. The froth framed my lips, and I wiped the remnants on my sleeve.

"Why don't you go and start some of that stew you know I love so much? You always make me work up an appetite." I leaned in, grazing her earlobe with a nip of my teeth.

Her body swayed into mine, melting at my touch. "I guess I can do that." She pulled away, and I could see the heat of passion rising in her seductive eyes.

"I'll finish this round with the boys and meet you there." I took another swig of the massive pint.

"Hurry," she whispered.

As she turned away, I landed a smack right on her plump little ass under that winter cloak. She yipped in surprise, throwing me a warning glare, but there was a silent invitation for more.

"Another," I called out to the barkeep.

He nodded while using a rag to clean out a cup before preparing another pitcher. I joined the boys, slamming the pitcher on the table. Its contents sloshed over the edge, and another rousing cheer sang into the air.

"Dante, you charming bastard."

"To Dante! Our savior from boredom!"

More sentiments like that rang out through the evening as fiddle songs flowed from one into another. My body felt so loose, and despite stepping in to smooth over some potential brawls, we all laughed the night away.

"You owe me, Murdock! Thanks to me, you still have all your teeth!" I growled out my joke as I shouted it, and the other men joined in with their ruckus laughter.

"What could you possibly want from me, D?! You get everything you ever want," Murdock said.

"I think I'll just start racking up IOU's. How's that sound?" I swayed in my seat, the ale hitting harder now.

"I'm sure I'll come to regret that." Murdock raised his glass to me before downing the rest and slamming it on the table.

The commotion of the others dulled around me as I sat in contemplation. I really did usually get everything I wanted. Somehow, the gods had blessed me with dashing good looks and an overflow of charm. I thought about what I could do with this hazily realized power.

I might be able to run this entire town. Compete for Mayor come the summer. A smile of greedy delight emerged as I thought about the bribes and tax fees that could settle right into my pocket.

When I drew up my weary head, a pair of brown eyes framed by blonde hair cut through the crowd, straight to me. Murdock's sister, Rosaleigh. I scanned the crowd, looking for him, but he may have already left.

She'd grown into a fine young woman, and suddenly I became acutely aware of how prominent her breasts were.

Maybe that I.O.U. would cash itself in, in a very interesting way. I rose from the table, staggering slightly over the chair before holding myself tall and strutting through the sea of bodies.

"Who are you here for?" I drawled out the words. The look in my eyes told her what I wanted her to say, willing it. She batted her lashes and a small smirk tugged on her lips. I leaned down, whispering into her ear, "Want to get into some trouble?"

"Are you saying you're trouble?" Her playful rebuttal roused my interest even further.

"How about we find out?" I crooned as I let my cheek graze hers.

With a final sweep of the tavern, I ushered her outside. This game would be better played in the shadows than out where everyone could see.

The frosty night air lashed my cheeks, but I could barely feel my fingers and nose anyway. Without letting her step too far ahead, I grabbed her wrist and pulled her back into me. She collided against my chest, and I dipped down to claim her mouth with mine.

We staggered back until she bumped against the tavern wall. I would just have a taste here before taking her some place secluded where I could ravish her body in all the ways I wanted. My hand came up, cupping her incredibly full breast. Gods, life was good.

"Dante?" the familiar voice scolded from behind.

Our lips smacked as I pulled away, glancing briefly over my shoulder. Before my vision could steady, I took a harsh blow to the cheek. Rosaleigh screamed and ran into the night.

When my feet stabilized after the hit, my palm pressed against the now tender area.

I looked up to see those turquoise eyes throwing daggers at me.

Shit.

"Bonnie," I put on a smile, acting like I was so happy to see her. Maybe not well thought out, but I needed to smooth this over—and fast—or else my bed would be cold tonight. No fun.

"I came back for my gloves. I expected to rake you over the coals for leaving me waiting in my bed. I should have known." The tension in her lips radiated with growing fury.

"I—" I started speaking before I truly knew what I was going to say. My vision made the ground writhe like waves on the ocean.

"You only think about yourself, Dante. You've been given more than most men ever hope to gain in their short, pathetic lives. I wanted to believe that deep down, you had a good heart. But you'll never learn. You'll never learn, because you'll never face punishment for your careless actions."

I could feel my cheek starting to swell, and stuck out my tongue to run along the throbbing cut she'd left over my lip. "So you're mad at me for being lucky?" I sneered. Walls of defensiveness rose before I could consider otherwise, the alcohol affecting my usual cool, levelheaded thinking.

Just beyond the wall was a group celebrating me and all I'd achieved. I could walk through this life, being handed anything I could ever need. Why should I be made to feel guilty for being one of the gods favored?

"I'm not mad." An eerie calm draped her words, and it made me snap to attention. "I'm furious," her tone dropped, and suddenly the night grew colder. Purple light began swirling around her palms, and a wind appeared out of nowhere, wildly blowing her raven hair.

"You will take the form of the monster that you truly are. Only when your selfish ways have died will your punishment be lifted." Her words boomed around me, as if she spoke from all directions. Wind twisted around my body, constricting it in a way it shouldn't be able to.

Piercing sharp hooks dug their way into my veins, one after another, over every part of me. I screamed out in pain, certain it was drowned out by the roaring wind. The ale lost its ability to numb me, and my veins seared with heat.

Ripping sounds tore around me, and from the immense pain, I surmised it to be my skin tearing open. My perception shifted. I could smell scents from the tavern as strongly as I had when I'd been in there before. My ears picked up a conversation happening from a couple that walked a few streets over.

The wind still swirled in a dizzying frenzy, and my breathing grew ragged. I could feel the rhythm of it, deep and unrelenting, but the sound had warped into something guttural and echoed.

The wind stopped, and I fell on my hands and knees into the snow. But the hands that caught my fall weren't my own. They were massive and covered in fur. Long, sharp claws sunk into the ground, anchoring me as I struggled to understand.

"I'll grant you a last courtesy in the seconds you have left to understand, even though you don't deserve it," Bonnie

gritted out through her teeth.

I peered up at her, still recovering from the assault.

“Villagers don’t respond well to vicious creatures. So you better run.”



Dante



For the amount of times I'd recalled that memory, the anguish never lessened. That night played over and over on a loop in my mind, as if I tried pinpointing a moment I could have done differently that would have changed my fate.

The problem was, there were multiple. Too many to count, in fact. Every victory, every indulgence, added to the bloated swelling of my pride. The most painful part about it was that Bonnie had been right.

This form I took was a reflection of the shame I'd brought upon myself. The punishment for a life with an unchecked ego. I'd accepted it long ago, that this would be the penance I'd pay.

The magic coursing through me prolonged my years, another layer of the punishment Bonnie inflicted. To live longer with the consequences.

The memory consumed my thoughts last night, and then again now as we passed the fork in the road. To the left was the path that led to Bonnie's cottage.

I'd tuned out Jasper's rambling as we continued toward the market. He needed to speak with Alaina privately and didn't want it to be obvious. So, I tagged along in order to distract Hu while Jasper and Alaina coordinated his plans for a surprise anniversary dinner. The two had been a couple since I'd met them, and I was happy to help—despite the sour hole in my heart where those dreams of my own had died.

Calista needed to stop at the market for some supplies before Jasper took her to Highcrest's border, anyway. I hadn't been comfortable with the idea of leaving Mira alone. She seemed equally as eager to join us, which let me relax about it.

She and Calista meandered behind us while Jasper provided suggestion upon suggestion for ways I could extend the fake conversation with Hu. I didn't doubt I could handle the task, so instead of giving him my full attention, my ears honed in on the conversation trailing behind.

Mira



A lot of the trees remained bare and streaked with black veins, but pines and evergreens provided much needed color against the bleak landscape.

Calista kept pace beside me, a perfect opportunity to try my new tactics.

“So, you met Dante a few years ago?” I asked.

She grinned. “I did.”

“Were you not scared?” An honest question.

“I’d be lying if I said he didn’t take my breath away at first.” She nudged my shoulder, and I couldn’t help but laugh, despite the scorch that spread across my cheeks.

“Actually, he saved my life, to be honest.” She peered at the sky in thoughtful reflection.

I eyed her, curious to hear the story.

“My father was a not-so-nice man. Quick to anger. Drawn to the drink. Not a magic wielder. My mother was bloodborn though, but she died when I was a teenager.”

I bit my lip, reflecting upon the painful loss of my own mother. “I’m sorry.”

She shrugged. “After that, he changed. If you’d met him while my mother was alive, he would have led a rally to support local witches and magic, even though their acceptance is iffy with the general public. He was so in love with her...

“But she got sick. It started in spring, and by the time autumn rolled around, she didn’t have any fight left. My father and I wept together by her side when she departed.

“I don’t know if it was the grief, or just my age, but my magic manifested a few weeks later. My mother had been so excited to practice with me. We’d both wondered for a long time what powers would be strongest in my blood.

“She possessed telekinetic magic, but we had a few others in our history. My great-great-grandmother was a seer who helped defeat the dark wielder in Argora Vale. It was rumored she sacrificed her power for the cause, but my great-grandmother had already been born.”

My heart stopped beating. I’d never heard what happened to the curse perpetrator after this kingdom’s destruction. But her word choice, *defeat*, fueled my determination. If there was a way to overcome it back then, there would be a way to do so now. We just had to figure it out. My teeth sunk into my lip.

Calista continued, voice somber, calling my focus back. “When my mother would put me in bed at night, we’d imagine which one I might get. Magic is unpredictable. Father never contributed to the conversation, just listened. He knew how much my mother wanted to be here to see it.”

Bringing up these personal details pained her; I could see it in the tense lines on her face. My heart broke for her.

“I think that’s why he started resenting my magic. Started resenting me. Anytime I would mention the haze of visions, it served as a reminder of the one who couldn’t be here to witness them. Eventually, he forbade my use of it around him. It became a silent, dirty secret that he grew ashamed of.

“But, one night, when I was eighteen, I thought I would be home alone for hours since he made his nightly rounds at the pub. So, I practiced. That was the first night I ever moved anything with my magic.” Her eyes brightened, and everything heavy on her face washed away. “My seeing abilities have always been sub par. I need to use a crystal to channel it. Diluted, I guess, through the generations. So when I found out that I had more than just a subdued version of magic flowing through me, I got a little carried away.”

“I should have been paying attention. I would have heard him coming up the front path if I had been, but I was so swept in my new abilities that I didn’t realize he came home until it was too late. When he walked in and saw me controlling a hairbrush in the air, he snapped.

“No pride, no sadness, just pure anger and resentment. He gave me a pretty good black eye that night, and I’m convinced he

almost broke my arm. All that before tossing me out into the wintery night, cursing the day I'd been born. He said if I ever came back, he'd kill me."

Gods.

"And I guess he didn't want to risk giving me any doubt, since he started shouting into the night that a witch was using dark magic. Fucking low blow, dad."

The penalty for using dark magic was death. My eyes bulged over how a father could do that to their child.

She continued, "It took mere minutes for families to start gathering in the street. I couldn't risk being caught. The accusation alone would have been enough to put my head on a spike. We lived close to the outskirts of town, so I stumbled into the forest.

"I ran until I could no longer see the torches lining Farhaven. You've been through the woods in the winter at night, fucking cold enough to freeze your balls off."

I hummed in agreement, shaking off the memory of the freezing wind, the biting frost—Dante wrapping his giant arms around me to keep me warm.

I swore I could still feel that warm touch, even though we were walking outside, and he was yards ahead.

"I was a *mess*. Imagine the state of me, in a dress of all things." Her lip curled in a look of sheer disgust.

My eyebrows jumped into my hairline.

"You wore dresses?" I questioned in jest. Her personality certainly didn't fit the typical modern lady, armed with a bow and quiver of arrows on her back, hair unkempt like it'd been cut by an axe instead of scissors.

"Used to. Something else to try and make the old man proud. That and my long, golden hair." She pretended to toss nonexistent tresses over her shoulder.

Laughter tumbled from both of us at the picture she painted. Not the Calista I knew at all.

"I'll give you one guess as to who found me perched up, frozen near death against a sickly twig tree." She looked at me, giving me the chance to answer.

A rush of butterflies swarmed around my heart. "Dante." He'd saved Calista.

I'd never know what awaited me at Highcrest Castle, but my time there grew more precarious with every passing day. Perhaps, and only the gods would know, he'd saved me, too.

She nodded, grinning from ear to ear, watching her feet sink into the snow with each step. "That big lug carried me back to the manor. If I had been conscious, I bet that trip would have been just as miserable as yours. Doesn't set a very good track record for him, does it?" She shook her head and laughed.

"Weren't you terrified? Of a beast approaching you?" Knowing Dante now, I fought feelings of guilt and foolishness, having feared him so heavily that first night. But I couldn't be the only one; he's a beast, for gods sakes.

"You know, I think in any other circumstances, I would have been, but the pain nearly took me out. Then the cold. Then after that, the fever. Those first interactions were a blur. He fed me and rested a damp cloth on my head while I fought the delirium. If I had been alert enough to have understood what I was seeing, then yes, totally. Probably would have shit my britches."

"You mean dress," I teased.

She snorted out laughter. "It would have complemented my feminine beauty so well, don't you think?" She jabbed me lightly with her elbow. "But no, I'd interacted with him through the fever, and as that slowly subsided, he'd already become familiar to me. Hard to be scared of a big puppy who feeds you multiple times a day." She winked.

Jasper rustled his wings, like he was getting antsy.

"As for that one." She pointed her nose toward the gargoyle. "He *did* scare the shit out of me. I'd been in the damned manor for a few days, mostly alone while King—err, Dante—hunted and patrolled. One day in the kitchen, I turn around to see that lump of gray rock perched on the kitchen island.

"He can be quiet as a mouse when he wants to be. Which is hard to believe now." She squinted, considering if she even believed her own statement.

"Anyway, I turned around and there he was, out of nowhere. But, the second he opened his rambling mouth, my defenses eased," she laughed. "He said I was welcome to stay, but he was tired of hiding after hearing intruders." She laughed. "The manor is his by inheritance, but Dante intimidated him, so he considered staying hidden until we left. But then we never did. He lasted impressively long, given how much he loves to talk."

"You guys seem really close," I added. I'd witnessed it for a long time, their close connection.

She took a big inhale of winter air, releasing whirls into the wind with her reply, "Yeah. Who knew an outcast witch would feel so at home with a beast and a gargoyle, hm?"

It should have sounded ridiculous, like a make-believe story. Weeks ago, it would have been.

"I hope you do, too."

I paused at her words.

"Feel at home, I mean. I know you didn't choose to be here, but...I know the toll living in Highcrest can take on those who wield. If your time with us has done anything, I hope it's taught you that you belong in this world."

I worked down the tension in my throat.

“Do you have any questions? About magic?” she asked.

Were there any questions I didn’t have? Even if my access to books hadn’t been as limited, any in Highcrest pertaining to the history of magic had long been banned or burned. Not ready to shed light on questions I had regarding my own gift, I steered the conversation back to focus on her. “What does a seer do?”

“Sees stuff,” she teased. “But no, um, for me at least, I can see things that are happening at the present moment. Not without help, though. My magic isn’t strong enough. But crystals have the capacity to hold magic, so, looking into my crystal ball and focusing on some place or someone, I can see what they’re up to. As if I’m another pair of eyes in the room.”

“Wait—” I stopped in my tracks, a nagging question pulling at my thoughts. “How did Dante know where to find me?” The question was partially rhetorical, mostly an accusation.

She hissed, sucking air in through her clenched teeth. “Yeah, about that...”

I wasn’t sure how to feel. Mostly I felt exposed. She’d been watching me. *They’d* been watching me. What did they see? What had they learned?

“No, no, don’t worry, we weren’t being creepy or anything. Anytime we searched for you, it would always start with just me. I didn’t need those peeping Tom’s catching you in the middle of dressing or something.”

Should that have made me feel better? Because it didn’t.

“What do you know about me?” A pretty direct way to find out.

She softened her expression, seeing that I had started to work myself up over it. “I know that first man we saw you with kept you in a tiny room behind bars. I know you don’t wield openly. I know you spent a lot of time alone at that castle.” She continued walking, and I joined her, desperate to know what else she had to say.

“And?” I pressed.

“And I knew you liked walks in the garden in the evening,” she concluded.

My lips worked over each other, trying to dig into my memory to recall a time I’d said anything out loud about my magic. Of course, that would have been extremely unlikely, but I searched my mind, nevertheless.

Calista stopped and faced me directly. “Listen, Mira. I know you were brought here under less than friendly circumstances. I don’t know everything you’ve gone through, but I can tell you’re guarded, and that’s okay. Highcrest is shit at supporting magic wielders. I obviously don’t know the extent of your powers, or how your blessing works, but...” she trailed off for just a moment, taking in a contemplative breath.

“To us, that’s not *all* you are. I hope you know that.” She placed her hand on my shoulder, staring me down, making sure her message was received.

Heat pricked the backs of my eyes. I hadn’t meant something other than my blessing since childhood. Miles and Adalene had been friendly to me, sure, but every so often they’d slip in something about my gift, and I knew it played a role in how they perceived me. How they valued me. How anyone valued me.

That wicked glimmer of desire accompanied almost every captor, eyeing me like a rabid dog would a piece of meat. When Dante, or Calista, or Jasper looked at me, I didn’t see that. Suddenly, I understood why I’d felt more at ease in their company.

Maybe since they’d been around magic their entire lives, having some of it in them themselves, my blessing didn’t have as strong of an effect? Or maybe the rumors just didn’t run as rampant here. Whatever made it this way, I deemed it a blessing from the gods.

It finally felt as though they were smiling down on me, chosen as one of their favored, and I’d passed all their tests. Emotions bubbled up my throat, and I didn’t dare say anything else for fear of opening the floodgates.



Calista and Jasper left for Highcrest after we returned to the manor. I’d convinced Dante to play a round of Druids & Horseshoes, which was fairly easy to do. He sat on the floor near the fire, keeping it lit so the room stayed toasty. We’d hit a certain point where neither of us understood the rules, and I didn’t think I’d ever adjust to hearing laughter come from a maw like his.

After that, we’d each retrieved a book from the study and sat in the parlor in silence, reading by the fire. There were a few moments where one of us would catch the other staring. We’d smile and return to our pages. That feeling of warmth and brightness in my chest seemed to grow.

When I retired to bed, I think I fell asleep with a smile on my face.

I woke in the night from a dream, one that left my skin dotted with sweat and my heart racing. The view of the cage door from my bed didn’t help settle my fear, but when I remembered the lock placement, that I had control, my concerns eased.

My sheets became a tangled mess as I tossed and turned, unable to settle.

So much for sleep.

Instead, I slid on my slippers and unlocked the cage door. A thud and soft squeal later, I navigated the dark hallway to the study. Moonlight had the room glowing blue, enough for me to find a match and lantern. I lit the wick, illuminating the book spines as I searched for a title that piqued my interest.

My attention turned to the desk and the stacks of books sitting there. A black, leather-bound tome sat on the top of the pile. I reached for it, running my thumb across the stamped lettering that read, *War of the Heart: A collection of poems*.

Poetry was exactly what I was in the mood for. Tucking it close to my chest, I left the study. When I stood in front of my room, I hesitated. Those bars loomed over me, hands reaching out to grip me tight, to hold me in place. I couldn't bring myself to step through them.

Instead, I went to the parlor. Shadows ate most of the house, but I was familiar enough with the layout to navigate with ease. Without the fire, the room held a steep chill, but a few throw blankets lived on the sofa. Lantern light in hand, I snuggled on the couch and cracked open the book. The pages were fine and worn, so I took delicate care.

My trained senses told me I wasn't alone and my trembling heart struggled to keep a steady beat. I whipped my gaze toward the door frame that led into the hallway to find a hulking silhouette.

"Dante," I said, releasing a strained exhale.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to frighten you. I was just making sure everything was okay," he said before lumbering in. I couldn't suppress a small smile, feeling a warmth spread through me at his concern.

"Nightly patrol?" I teased.

"I heard your door open."

I shouldn't have been surprised. Wolf senses must be pretty keenly attuned. Was he about to ask me to return to my room? Where I would remain behind those bars, locked away and—

"Would you like me to start a fire?" He nodded toward the hearth.

My eyes darted between him and the fireplace. "Yes, please."

His giant form moved through the room with surprisingly gentle ease. He prodded the logs until the flames grew tall, then silently began walking out.

"Wait," I called, unable to let him leave. Like I knew he would, he stopped and looked at me.

I hadn't prepared anything to say. My fingers kneaded the blanket on my lap, twisting the fabric in every direction. "Would you stay with me?"

"Of course," he said softly with no hesitation. He meandered around the chairs, placing himself on the floor before me.

I gave him an incredulous glare before nodding to the furniture that would be undoubtedly more comfortable. He never seemed to sit in the chairs or on the couch.

His light chuckle warmed me more than the growing fire. "Calista would have my head if I broke another piece of furniture. We've been through...a few over the years. Not much is made to withstand someone of my size. So, the floor it is." He gestured to the limited options around the coffee table and furniture.

"Well, that can't be too comfortable," I said, lifting my blanket to adjust my position, making a little more space. "You could at least use the couch to lean on."

His gentle smile worked to one side. Whether or not he agreed, it seemed he decided to humor me. He twisted, then tilted his head back, resting atop the seat cushion next to me.

"Better?" I asked, bearing a smug smile.

Not a hint of humor in his reply as his gaze locked onto mine. "Much better."

My cheeks felt flush as he continued to stare, as if memorizing every detail on my face. His fur glowed from the firelight, some of the strands almost glistening. As if my skin held a memory of its own, I recalled how soft it was. I'd never lived with an animal before, but regardless of size, this creature held a magnetism I couldn't place. My fingers twitched. "Can I pet you?" I asked, feeling a little silly.

He blinked, then adjusted his shoulders into a more relaxed position. "I won't bite." He tried to suppress a ridiculously charming lip curl.

I huffed a laugh through my nose. Slowly, I brought my hand to his head, letting my fingers sink into the soft fur, then dragged my nails back along the same route. Judging by the way his eyes fluttered and a soft groan climbed up his throat, I could tell he liked it.

"Does no one ever pet you?"

He released a deep chuckle. "No, I don't think anyone's ever pet me. Calista likes to mockingly pat me sometimes."

"I would think she, of all people, would have. She does call you *puppy*, after all." I bit my lip to control my growing smile. My hair cascaded over my shoulder as I tilted my head, feeling a bump on his skin hidden beneath the plush fur. "What's this?"

He brought his paw up, using the pad of his finger to search out the lump. "One of many scars."

"Hm." With a curiosity of their own, my fingers brazenly trailed around his ears, neck, shoulder. "There are quite a few. Are

they all from the forest? I got a few cuts myself running through there.”

His hand quickly rested atop mine. “I’m sorry for that, Mira.” Sincerity laced every word.

My heart weighed heavy, knowing I’d inadvertently made him feel guilty. “I think there’s not one person who makes it out of this life unscathed.”

With a graceful movement that belied his massive form, he twisted around, resting before me on his knees, paws settled around my thighs. A move that once would have frightened me to my very core, I now found comforting.

My hand remained, never breaking contact with his body as he turned. At our closeness, my heart became frantic, but I didn’t lean away. Not even an inch.

“The world has been unfair to you, Mira, and I *hate* that.”

“I’m not the only one,” I said, sadness gleaming in my eyes. He was covered in scars that no one could see, and I didn’t just mean the physical ones that marred his skin beneath a layer of fur. I’d seen the way others in this kingdom glared at him. Feared him. Even after all he’d tried to do for them.

He raised up, pressing a tender kiss to the top of my head. I inhaled his warmth, basking in the overpowering magnitude of his strength. My hand rested atop his abdomen. Of their own volition, my fingers twisted into the soft threads of his coat, catching on a drastically raised notch of skin.

“What happened here?” I memorized the blunt, thick patch of scar tissue beneath my roving fingertips.

He sighed, rearing back on his haunches, his protective paws surrounding me still. “That is a reminder that sometimes there is no redemption.” His brown eyes swam in a pool of grief, of sorrow. “For a while, I lost myself to a curse. Became nothing but a shell filled with primal rage and fury. Reputations like that stick with you. A witch freed me, but the damage had been long done.

“I went to see my parents when I had come back to myself, but not even a mother could love a beast after that.” His gaze dropped to the wound mark. “She stabbed me as I tried to explain what I was and what I wasn’t. I suppose too long had passed, and she’d already mourned the son she’d lost. I was no longer him.”

His wolf eyes developed a glassy sheen.

“I’m sorry, Dante.” My heart cleaved in two for this soft-hearted creature before me. Rejected by his own family, a reputation bred from a curse. Our souls sang a similar song.

I felt it then, like our souls bled and mixed with one another, our histories and trauma blending together.

He was no longer looking me in the eye, and from the ever-growing silence, I gathered he didn’t want to speak about it further. I wouldn’t push him, though questions formed on my tongue.

“Will you stay out here with me? While I read?” I plucked the book by my side and raised it, changing the subject.

His canine lips curled upward. “You like poetry?”

“I do.” Not only was it beautiful and haunting, it had become my shield.

“Will you read out loud?” he asked.

I smiled in surprise. No one had ever asked that of me, and even if they had, I never would have obliged. But with him, I didn’t want to stay quiet. “Happy to.”

We adjusted ourselves, leaving his arm to drape over my thighs where I rested the splayed book, his head relaxing against my side. I read through the flickering firelight while my other hand scratched his head and massaged his ears.

We remained that way as I spoke soothing rhythms of poetry into the night against the crackling sounds of the hearth. A feeling in my chest lulled me into blissful serenity as my eyes became too heavy to fight.

Mira



“A hem.”

A clearing throat jolted me from sleep, and judging by Dante’s jerking reaction, him as well. We’d become a mess of tangled limbs and overlapping body parts. With the fire having died in the night, I had snuggled closer to him for warmth.

As the haze of sleepiness lifted from my vision, I beheld Jasper and Calista staring at us. I pushed up off the cushions. “Oh, I must have fallen asleep.”

“Asleep, huh? Is that what-WUAH.”

Calista’s elbow rammed into Jasper’s abdomen, causing him to fold in half.

“I didn’t hear you come in,” Dante said as he assessed the filtering in daylight and sat up.

Jasper fixed his hand on his stomach, straightening slowly, groaning as he said, “Yeah, you slept in.” There was a hint of a wheeze on his next exhale. Calista held a beaming smirk.

“I’ll get started on breakfast,” Dante said before rising and exiting the parlor through the connected dining room and going down the steps into the kitchen.

Before both of their gazes had a chance to fall upon me again—and possibly ask any probing questions—I excused myself under the guise of letting them settle while I dressed for the day before hearing about their trip. My cheeks heated as I lifted from the couch and the open book tumbled to the floor. A quick swipe had the book bound against my chest as I padded down the hall.

Once dressed, I went to return the book to the study. I’d left the library door open last night, and the light streaming through the hall showered upon the intricate carvings scrawled across the opposite set of doors. Leaves, vines, and trees, finely etched into the wood, had me questioning what lay behind.

Possibly still wanting to avoid an assault of questions as to how they’d discovered me and Dante in such a state, I thought now was as good a time as any to explore. I allowed my fingers to trail lightly overtop, feeling each groove and curve of the enchanting design.

Closing my fingers around the long, vertical handle, my thumb pressed the mechanism down. A thud echoed as the door unlatched. I hauled back the heavy thing and a gust of cold air hit me, tossing my hair over my shoulders.

A beautiful courtyard appeared before me.

Completely surrounded by the walls of the house, it was a private oasis tucked away in the middle of the manor. Twisting tree limbs braided together fell off a thick trunk that sat taller than the height of the roof, all of its branches bare from the unforgiving season.

A few stone benches bordered a fountain that sat right in the center. And the most beautiful red roses decorated bushes that lined the walls. My breath hitched as I took in the sight contrasted against the white snow.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?”

I jumped and sucked in a breath, startled by his deep voice. Snapping my gaze to the doorway, I looked up to see Dante staring into the courtyard. He leaned casually against the frame, arms crossed before him. How could a creature so primed and muscled also possess such grace and elegance?

“Is startling me your new favorite activity?” I swallowed against my drying throat, hand pressed firmly against the thumping in my chest.

“Sorry.” He tried covering up his amusement to be polite, and his eyes twinkled with a lightened spirit that I rarely got to see.

I chuckled, calming down after the scare. Fixing my eyes back on the stunning garden, a question came to mind. “How are there roses here, of all places?”

Dante inhaled deeply. "The owners of this manor must have planted winter roses before the curse, but even they only bloomed this year. It's a sign that the damage of the curse is relenting. We wonder if this kingdom could ever be restored to the way it was before, but seeing as it took one hundred years for even this to happen, it could take a while."

With destruction so widespread and rampant, the thought of this kingdom returning to life seemed so out of reach. That possibility seemed even further with dark magic surging again, but neither he nor I commented on it. My throat thickened with the truth that I didn't dare reveal. Not yet.

Carefully walking through the snow in my slippers, I approached the nearest red bloom and reached out to touch the velvety petal between my fingers.

"You call new light to the darkest of nights," I murmured, relating a line of poetry I'd read from that book.

"You are the entire world," he added, his voice carrying from the doorway until it brushed against my skin.

I whipped my head around, surprise flashing on my features. He knew the reference. Of the hundreds of poems I'd read in that book, it had been the one that struck my heart the most. He stared at me in equal amazement.

His eyes seemed to sparkle from the light reflecting off the snow. "That's my favorite poem."

I lifted the book still in my hand since I had gotten distracted from returning it. I hadn't read that passage out loud last night since I'd gotten further into the book by the time I sat down to read.

He smiled softly. "I've read those words hundreds of times. But hearing them from your lips..."

My heart picked up its pace, the air between us starting to burn with...I wasn't sure.

"I don't think they've ever sounded more beautiful."

I stared in utter shock, my eyelids fluttering. In all the years I'd kept silent, I'd never imagined anyone would find beauty in my voice. A storm swirled in my chest, but not one of thunderous clouds or rocky seas, not one of torment or fear. Something made of rays of light and dancing butterflies.

For the first time, my voice held power, yet words evaded me. Shouting grew from inside the house, Jasper calling us to hear about their trip. I cleared my throat and dropped my gaze. He stepped back and allowed me to lead the way.

We gathered in the living room and listened to Calista chat about the haul she'd managed to swipe as Jasper brought in the items. They'd also run into a few residents of Argora Vale fleeing this dying land to go live in Highcrest. Knowing the trouble they'd likely face, given the evidence of magic in their eyes, Calista decided to help.

She'd sought out those she knew who belonged to a network that had or accepted magic in Highcrest, successfully arranging for that family of three to take up residence there. It was nice to know at least some people there cared.

I listened to their brief commentary on the deteriorating state of things and held my breath. Luckily, none of them asked any pressuring questions regarding the blessing they were waiting for me to bestow. Though, I sensed those might come soon.

Switching the subject, they mentioned that Hu's sister Alaina was coming over tomorrow to help Jasper cook. They brought up blood buckets, and I winced, asking what they were talking about. Apparently, to stave off the ogres from further dwindling their hunting supply, Dante would deliver blood from the creatures he'd hunted. A perfect ogre meal. Bloodthirsty *indeed*.

The thought of Dante leaving did something to me, but I refused to show any discomfort.

"Well, I feel disgusting. I'm going to take a nice, long, hot bath. Disturb me and I'll cut off your manhood," Calista casually threatened as she strolled to the bathroom.

"On that note, there's a certain baker I'd like to see." Jasper wagged his eyebrows and smiled, departing from the front door. He launched from the front steps into the sky, and once again, Dante and I remained alone.

Not long after, we moved to the study, where we talked about stories and poetry for hours, sharing our insights and thoughts. He'd even read a few passages of other poems that he loved. His voice carried me away to a place above the clouds. The gods themselves must have paused their revelry to listen.

You could hear the passion flowing from him as he brought inked words to life. He spoke with a deep reverence, letting me catch a glimpse of how he viewed the world. A reflective, introspective, thoughtful dissection of painful circumstances. Thoughts that could only come from a soul left tarnished and bruised.

It was one of the most beautiful things I'd ever witnessed.

I'd asked him to pull any books on magic or Argora Vale's history, of which there were few. I'd look at them later, hopefully find something pertinent on how to stop the spreading dark magic.

Jasper returned home for the evening, and we all ate dinner together, but I was the only one to have brambleberry pie for dessert. We played a few rounds of Druids & Horseshoes, but with my belly full and the fire warm, my eyes quickly became heavy.

"Let me take you to your room?" Dante asked, his voice soft like velvet.

I forced my eyes open and nodded. Before I could rise from my chair, giant arms scooped me up. Relaxing into his hold was as normal as breathing. Calista and Jasper bade me a goodnight, and the next thing I knew, blankets were being pulled over me.

The fire beside my bed had been lit, a cocoon of heat beckoning me further to sleep.

With thoughts of Dante flitting around the edges of my consciousness, I managed to say, "Tell me something I don't know about you."

He backed out of the room until he stood in the hall. I could hardly keep my eyes open, but his soft words caressed my ears. “Green is my favorite color.”



Chances were Dante had already left since he'd commented on departing before sunrise. Still, I found myself racing to put on my slippers and hurried down the hall.

Calista sat at the island and Jasper surveyed the pantry supplies lining the open faced shelves.

“Mira! Good morning, oh coveted one,” Jasper greeted with a welcoming smile.

This might have been the first time that word didn't plunge a knife of despair through my gut. Almost as if the word didn't hold the power it once had.

I took a seat. “Good morning.” Before I could stop myself, the question slipped out. “Did Dante leave already?”

“He did.” When I heard the smile Calista wore as she answered, I couldn't help but look at her. She beamed, regarding me with an assessing stare. My cheeks blazed from the attention.

“You two spent a lot of time together yesterday,” she continued.

Jasper picked up on her tone and gave me his full attention, gauging my reaction. Like this was something he'd been wanting to mention.

My eyes bounced between them both.

“He doesn't spend time with a lot of people,” she added.

“He actually does really well at *not* spending time with people.” Jasper chuckled.

“I've seen the way some of the residents here look at him. How they run.” They both stiffened. “Why is that?”

Calista slowly worked the mound in her mouth.

“That's not our story to tell,” Jasper said, taking something seriously for the first time since I'd known him.

It made my heart ache for Dante all the more.



Mira



Alaina arrived not long after breakfast, and I now understood why Jasper wanted her help. She possessed a rare magic that gave her the ability to reverse time, something they found particularly useful right about now.

Jasper would make a creation, botch it, and she would use her magic to revert the inedible concoction back to its base ingredients. Then he'd begin again.

Inspiration struck like an asp. "Would your magic work on the curse?" I asked, all of us gathered around the island waiting for Jasper's recent creation to finish baking. Maybe it wasn't Dante or Calista or Jasper my magic needed to work on, maybe it was Alaina. I straightened in my seat, heart racing. Calista's pointed glare told me she'd thought my question odd. If I had the magic to cure the curse, why would I be searching for an alternative? I didn't meet her stare.

Alaina sighed. "No. Jasper flew me to the source a few weeks back. I tried. I don't know if it's too powerful or immune, but nothing happened. There's too much we don't understand about dark magic. No one even knows where it comes from, or why it's like, leaking again."

Disappointment became a heavy thing in my gut. Of course that would have been too easy. I'd still have to carry out my plan, though I wasn't sure how. I kept losing focus whenever I'd try, distracted by the growing ease and familiarity among these magical beings. But I needed to do better. To come up with concrete questions that would help me dig.

I needed to clear my head. Strategize. "Can I go for a stroll in the gardens? Alone?" I asked.

"I don't think King would like that," Jasper admitted, shifting uncomfortably on his stool.

I bit my lip a little too hard, struggling with the familiar restriction after feeling free of it.

He seemed to note it. "Let me do a sweep around the perimeter, okay?"

"You've got probably twenty minutes until that's done," Alaina said in approval, referencing his most successful looking dough yet. "And while I hesitate to admit it, you might have done a decent job this time." She gave him a wry smile. "I need to head out. A few other families need their rotting food reversed, and then I'm going to take a fat nap."

"Thanks Alaina, you're the best!" Jasper clapped his hand over her shoulder a little too hard, making her grimace at him. "We'll wait for this stunningly gorgeous creation to finish baking and then we'll head outside?"

"Great!" I raced to my room and dressed for the cold.



Jasper launched from the ground, disappearing over the treetops. I inhaled a deep, centering breath. Reflecting over the circumstances that led me here, it almost seemed carefully orchestrated. I tilted my head back, peering up into the wide expanse of gray clouds above. Survival wasn't at the forefront of my mind any longer. It was my turn to do something *remarkable*.



In a small town nestled against the forest's edge, a secret request had been delivered. Under cover of moonlight, a witch ventured into the home of a small family.

"Your daughter has a remarkable future," the woman said, her unnatural blue eyes almost glowing.

A wife gripped the hand of her husband as the witch carefully observed their little girl.

"We just want to make sure she's safe. Protected, in case anything ever happens to us," the nervous mother said.

"Those attacks have been increasing in frequency. We want our girl to have something to fight back with," the father said, admiring his daughter as she played with a stuffed dog.

A cursed beast had roamed from the kingdom in the north, slaying citizens in its wake. A battalion of royal guardsmen carrying fire had finally driven it back, but the people feared its return.

Not willing to lose their little girl, the parents spent nearly all their savings to hire the traveling witch. A desperate attempt to protect that which they loved most.

The magical woman named Nila, with a brown beauty mark above her lip, continued to gaze at the little, auburn-haired girl. Not just into her eyes, but into her soul.

Transference casters couldn't bestow any magic they wished. They had to read a person's aura and feel what sort of magic belonged. As with all things, magic followed rules.

"What better way to protect her than for her to be admired? Her spirit shines like a beacon."

The girls' parents exchanged nervous glances between them. This had been a risk, but whispers on the street and carefully selected phrases from silver-haired strangers had forged the path, bringing them to this moment where destiny would be fulfilled.

The witch said, "Young Miss Mirabelle will have a very special gift, indeed." Her palms hovered over each other and opened to reveal a butterfly made of light.

The little girl gazed upon the display with delight. She admired the magical creations with a smile as wide as the sea.

The witch's hands glowed like stars as they danced over the little girl's head. When she spoke, her words became an echoing chant. "Those who have reason to fear her will be drawn to her instead. Power to influence hearts to overcome fear, minds to overcome doubt. To encourage, to strengthen."

It happened then, the mark of magic. The little girl's hair lightened to an unnatural red, and her mother held back tears. When Nila left that home, she'd had no idea what lay in store for that red-headed child.

But fate did.



I may not be able to snap my fingers and heal the land or put food back on tables, but I believed in the ones who could. Dante, Calista, Jasper, Alaina, Hu—they already did so much to serve the kingdom.

I just needed time. To find an opportune moment to whisper my power into existence, so that it would set them on the path that led to their salvation. It would help if I understood more regarding the curse a century ago, but that information seemed scant—if existent at all.

For years I'd toss out poetic passages that left my captors mentally reeling, making them think I'd wielded to grant their desires. Sometimes my magic would shine through, whether I intended it or not. Those were the instances that lent credence to The Coveted's rumored magic, when in reality, they'd simply broken through their own barriers to achieve their dreams.

But too much weighed on this outcome, and these people meant too much to me to leave it to chance. If I started quoting random lines that were out of context and made no sense, they would most definitely look at me strangely. And I wasn't ready to bear their judgment or expose my truth.

I absentmindedly leapt into the snow, creating tracks and designs while my mind wandered. Imagining what this place would look like in the spring occupied my thoughts for a while. Dried plants poked up through the snow in certain areas, and I wondered if anything bloomed with color when the snow was gone, like the roses in the courtyard. A symbol of hope, of life.

Twirling around, I invaded more untouched snow—a canvas now mottled by evidence of me. One jump, then another as I contemplated how to move forward. I doubted those books in the study held the information I sought, seeing as they were all dated prior to the curse.

CRACK.

I stopped, peering around the spacious landscape. Nothing but naked trees at the property's edge as far as I could see. A low rumble continued, and my hearing tracked it to underneath my feet. My heart slammed into my chest.

Before I could decide how to move, the ice beneath gave way. My entire body sank into the hidden icy pool. Shock from the

frigid temperatures gripped me like a vise. My arms flailed, trying to latch onto the snow banks around me.

But every attempt failed as the ice below my frantic grabbing shattered. With all the force I could muster, my burning lungs gasped for air, swallowing it down in uneven waves. My heavy, wet cloak created resistance as I tread water and spun, trying to find where the ice met the land.

Everything drowned in white. Not a single hint of refuge. "D-D-Da-ante," I tried calling out the first name that came to mind, a gut reaction, but it couldn't have been more than a whisper. My teeth chattered, and my gasps hitched in my throat. My movements in the water slowed. I could feel every muscle stiffen.

"J-Jasp-p-per," I tried again, but my diaphragm could hardly expand. "Ca-l-l-lis-sta." Even quieter.

The water rose, slowly consuming my chin.

Then my mouth submerged.

Throwing every ounce of exertion I had left into my arms and legs, I tried keeping myself afloat.

The water covered my nose.

My gaze took in treetops in the background, and the upper levels of the manor on my right before a clear, freezing layer flood overtop.

The familiar silence of being under water that I'd so enjoyed during my baths held an eerie, menacing effect in this pond. Life sat just above the waterline. A new life. *My* life. One where I was more than my blessing, more than my magic. One where I wasn't alone.

Extending my arm up, my fingers came into view, the tips reaching in vain to break the surface.

My feet hit the ground, and for a moment, I thought I was saved. I just needed to shove off the bottom and project myself upward. The surface was so close that I'd be out in no time. But when more seconds passed, and it didn't happen, eerie dread sunk in.

My body had nothing left to give. Signals from my brain weren't communicating to my frigid limbs.

I could see the way out, knew how to get there. Knew that life for me had only really just begun and I was about to lose it all. The freezing water consumed my warm tears the moment they shed, stealing the last traces of my life in this world. Mounting pressure in my lungs made them want to burst.

Too frozen to swim, the lack of oxygen began choking the life out of me, and I fought for as long as I could to resist the urge to draw breath. It would all be over the second I did.

It was a cruel twist of fate that my blessing wouldn't cause my death—after I'd finally chosen how to use it—but my own insistence of freedom. I could have remained inside, gathered around friendly faces.

Faces of those I'd known in my life flashed before my eyes. Some I loved, others I hated. The last, I wished I'd had more time with. I could almost see him above me, as if calling me home. A silhouette of furry ears.

That was the moment darkness consumed me.



Dante



The farther I traveled into the forest, the farther I'd have to travel back. And distance meant time. Time I didn't want to spend away from her.

Mira.

Long ago, in my days of debauchery and egotistical endeavors, I never cared to nourish a soulful exchange. Casual, fleeting, meaningless, but fun. Those were the relationships I sought.

I never would have fathomed how a heart could feel toward someone without physical intimacy. How four letters of a name could form the most beautiful sound. In an afternoon with Mira, discussing art, the human condition, pains and desires, her insights shattered me.

She might not have even realized how much she revealed about herself while discussing lyrical prose, but those things she'd expressed had been stamped on her soul. Hopelessness. Yearning for freedom. The confines of destiny.

A familiar gnawing clawed in my chest, but I cared less about it today.

I'd picked up a trail of a single deer and followed it mindlessly while thoughts of Mira swelled in my mind.

In the distance, a motionless pile surrounded by red snow told me I'd lost my chance of success. Upon inspection, it'd been unmistakably shredded by the hands of ogres.

Fuck.

I'd stupidly waited too long. Wasted time proved a potentially harmful mistake. The ogres wouldn't be the villager's competition if I'd just fucking done my job.

I crouched in front of the dead thing, scraping my claws along the tops of my shoulders. A drawn out irritated snarl rolled out of my throat.

I'd gotten distracted from my responsibilities.

Not that I held any position of authority or reign over the creatures in Argora Vale, but being the largest, fastest, and stealthiest meant I had the most to offer. After what I'd put the kingdom through for nearly fifty years, I owed them—even if they had trouble accepting my help, let alone my presence.

Tracks in the snow made my hot animal blood run cold. They'd migrated further north than normal in search of food because I'd stupidly delayed their meal. Shame latched onto me, and my paws pounded against the ground as if trying to outrun it. After an hour, the guilt didn't relent.

I skidded to a halt, releasing an anguish filled roar into the sky. Birds dashed from the trees, and creatures fled from their burrows, the vibrations of my rage coursing through the land.

"I'm never going to be good enough," I gritted out, squeezing my closed fists at my sides. My lungs fought to fill with air from the rapid rise and fall of my chest. Collapsing into the snow behind me, I stared at the open sky.

"An entire lifetime already gone by, and I never get it right." Defeat wrapped its arms around me like a cocoon, coaxing me into submission.

The urge to hunt had left completely, collapsing into the snow at the same time I did. A spark of pleasant memory shone so brightly it cast out the shadows of my demons. All four of my limbs extended and retracted at my sides, searching for a reminder of something good.

Without wasting more time, I rose up on my haunches, ready to take off back to the manor. My suspicions had been confirmed: game had traveled further west. I'd plan accordingly for my next hunt. Before I lunged from my position, a comically large wolf outline with wings looked up at me from the ground.



Knowing the manor would be within my sight in minutes filled me with a sense of comfort I hadn't experienced in years. Decades.

Movement above caught my eye. Jasper flew overhead, and in a fun attempt to avoid his detection, I pressed against a tree. I waited, staring up at the sky, watching for when he would glide by.

A moment passed, then two. *What the hell?*

Stepping out from the bark covered hiding spot, I scanned the sky. No gargoyle in sight.

Maybe he backtracked? "No fun," I mumbled.

"No fun?!" His rattling voice blurted from behind me.

Out of reaction, I spun, swinging my massive, deadly paw, ready to swipe the surprise ambush. He ducked and solidified into rock.

Smart, since one knick of my claw could end any creature.

Jasper morphed back into himself and said, "And you call *me* no fun! At least I didn't come down to attack *you*." He swiped off imaginary rubble from his body.

"You startled me. I've told you not to do that," I snarled, mostly irritated he got the jump on me. Being a descendent of stone, he didn't carry a scent like every other living thing. Made him less detectable. I hated that.

"Well, I couldn't miss the opportunity. You thought you were going to best me." A roguish grin plastered his face.

"I see now why Calista never lets you win," I mused.

"I think she cheats." He shrugged, so casually calling out his friend in order to hold the high ground.

Huffing out a laugh, I went to reply, "I'm sure she—"

D-D-Da-ante.

My ears perked up. "Did you hear that?"

Jasper pouted his lips, languidly scoping the woods around us. "Hear what?"

The faintest call on the wind. I started to doubt if I even actually heard anything.

J-Jasp-p-per.

"*Mira*." I took off running. Another call for help drowned out by my thundering paws on the frozen ground.

A trace of her scent in the air confirmed my fears.

The manor came into view, and within seconds, I crossed the property line. Frantically searching the land, I couldn't see her, couldn't pick up more than faint remnants of her as I sniffed. When the surface of the pond rippled, I honed in on it.

Air bubbles.

My paws carried me there within a heartbeat, and I cursed myself for not recognizing the exposed water sooner.

My chest ached, at risk of splitting in two with every second it took me to get to her. Slamming to a stop at the water's edge, where the jagged segments of ice opened, I saw the faint swaying of red beneath the surface.

Reaching into the icy pool, I caught hold of her arm and hauled her from the water.

"Gods." An exasperated Jasper cried from behind me.

"GET THE FIRE GOING," I ordered, cradling her against my chest and barreling toward the back door. I barely registered Jasper taking flight around the manor.

I barged through the kitchen door with such force I suspected the hinges broke. But I'd break any door, anything that stood in my way. I'd take down this whole damn building if it didn't provide the shelter she needed.

Carrying her through the dining room, Jasper already stood at the fireplace, the front door still wide open from his swift entrance.

"What's going on?!" Calista emerged into the parlor.

"GET HER A CHANGE OF CLOTHES! SHUT THAT DOOR," I barked, rattling windows with my fury. The beast inside me reared its ugly head, making me teeter on the line of losing control. The fur along my spine jutted out like harsh spikes.

But gazing down at Mira, I was able to get myself in check. She needed me. Here. In control.

Calista sprinted down the hall, and Jasper fumbled with logs of chopped firewood beside the mantle and started tossing them in the growing blaze.

Her skin was cast in a ghostly glow, less color than usual in her pale complexion. The cyan coloring tinting her lips made my stomach churn.

"She's not breathing," I whispered the words out loud as recognition hit.

I set my paws over her chest, only to see the size comparison. Fear opened up the ground like a bottomless chasm, and I

tumbled down.

If I pushed down on her with any imperfectly measured force, I could crush her bones like twigs. My paws shook, holding back in horror.

Calista stormed back into the room. "Here!" She shoved the clothes in front of my face.

"She's not breathing." I moved out of the way, setting her body gently on the floor, even though it killed me.

"What?" Calista asked, fear lacing her voice, a sound I'd never heard from her before now.

"SAVE HER!" I swore the manor's foundation shook.

Calista threw herself down in front of Mira and immediately began chest compressions. Each drawn out second carried the weight of time—of eternity. Staring at her lifeless body, something that had already secured its place latched around my heart squeezed, making it hard to breathe.

She couldn't die. I needed her. I needed her to be okay more than I needed air in my lungs. More than I needed food for the kingdom. More than I needed to be free.

More than I needed to live.

Tears crowded my eyes before falling into my fur and splattering on the floor. The salty streams careened out of me as I stood back, helpless.

Jasper moved quickly out of the room, but I couldn't care. My gaze never left her.

Calista leaned forward, pinching her nose and breathing into her mouth. Mira showed no response when Calista returned to her chest compressions.

"How long was she under?" Calista asked in between thrusts, her pace never wavering.

"Couldn't have been long, maybe a minute, but I don't know how long she'd been in the water. Her lips are fucking blue."

My eyes were staring, but almost unseeing as tears poured out.

"The fire will help," she said, her breath already shortening from the strain.

"Don't stop," I begged, my bottom lip wobbling alongside my desperate plea.

"I won't."

Jasper came back, a dozen blankets clutched in his grasp.

"Come on, Mira," Calista encouraged before going down for another breath.

A cough, sputter, and strangled choking noises became the most beautiful sounds I'd ever heard. Water erupted from Mira's mouth as she spewed out remnants of the pond.

Instincts had me moving immediately.

I nudged Calista out of the way, gathering Mira into my arms, propping her upright while she continued fighting for adequate air.

"Mira, I'm here. I've got you." Relief, heartache, gratitude, and fear manifested in every falling drop.

I wrapped her in my arms, gently stroking her cheek. She didn't open her eyes, but her breathing remained steady. The chill from her body seeped through my fur and into my skin. Jerking my head to the others in the room, I let out the most ferocious growl.

"LEAVE."

Calista placed her hand on Jasper's forearm and coaxed him out of the room. He dropped the blankets reluctantly, but forced himself to leave.

Good man.

Hooking the top of her clothes with a single extended claw, I lifted the blue fabric taut, then sliced through every piece of material until my claw came free.

Peeling back the soaked and heavy fabric, I unbound her from its clutches and tossed it to the side. It hit the ground with a wet smack. I scooted closer to the fire and tucked her into me, burying her in my chest.

I held onto her like she was life itself, and wept.

Hours passed where I did nothing except secure her tighter when she erupted in shivers. When one of them came into the room, I'd grab a blanket and cover her naked body, shielding her from view.

Jasper continually stoked the fire, and Calista prepared a stew. The house filled with the aroma of herbs and meat as it simmered for hours. Mira would need a hot meal when she came to. I didn't care if it drained the rest of our dwindling stock.

My worries subsided the longer I held her, the stronger her heartbeat became. I swore I could feel her leaning into me on occasion, and it filled me with everything my life had been lacking.

She finally stirred. "Dante?" her voice rasped, a reminder of how she looked nearly lifeless under the water.

I swallowed the strain of the memory. "I'm here."

Her head lazily rolled, and when she caught sight of her exposed skin, she thrust her body into mine, covering herself in my fur. She gripped me hard, weaving my fur through her fingers.

"It was best that I warmed you before putting you in fresh clothes. But they're here, if you'd like. Are you still cold?"

Her tense grip loosened. "Oh, um. I don't think so. I feel weak, though."

“Relax.” I pulled up the blanket, securing it around her. “Rest. For as long as you need. When you’re ready, there’s a stew.”

“Did Jasper make it?” The lighthearted flare in her response made my heart gallop.

“No, Calista,” I chuckled. Tears threatened to make another appearance.

“Well, that sounds good then.”

Tears emerged full force hearing her come back to me. “I’m sorry I left you. I shouldn’t have.”

Silence took over for a moment before she responded, “You’re here now.”

My heart split in my chest. “I am. I won’t leave you again, green eyes.”



For the duration of the evening, I didn’t release her. She donned her Calista’s matching pant and sweater set and thick woolen socks. Even her hair had completely dried.

The four of us ate dinner in the parlor because I wouldn’t allow Mira to leave the fire’s heat. After Calista and Jasper had called it a night, I finally felt confident enough to bring her upstairs. She didn’t protest once.

Cradling her in my arms was a balm to my tempest soul. Step by step, my every concern was her well-being. A burst of pride struck my core when she would adjust herself, snuggling deeper into my hold.

We entered my room, the biggest in the manor. Dark woods and burgundy fabrics created a moody sanctuary. I brought her to the four-poster bed and timidly set her down. This had been the first time I’d let her out of my grasp all evening. That hole in my chest grew hollow, my arms cold.

It didn’t last long as I rounded the bed, crawling in on the other side and aligning us together.

My paw draped over her hip, and I slid her back into me. My body crowded over hers, her back flush against me, tucked in, and safe.

“The thought of losing you today,” I started, struggling to find the words to even broach the subject. “All I could think about was how selfish I’ve been.”

“What do you mean?” she questioned.

Gods, her voice sang like a harp-song from the heavens.

“I haven’t shared with you as much as you’ve shared with me. That’s not fair. You asked me if I’d ever witnessed anyone be killed.” I gulped down the part of me that begged not to speak the words. “I haven’t always been this way. A beast. I was a human, from Farhaven.”

She turned her head to peer at me through those beautiful lashes. I almost wished she’d look away.

“I wasn’t a good man. A witch cursed me as punishment. When she did, I lost a part of myself. For decades I stalked the woods, lurked around towns. The human part of me became dormant, buried under a haze of primal instinct, turning me into a feral, bloodthirsty monster.”

I wished with everything in me that I didn’t have to continue. That my horrors were less. “I preyed on innocent creatures, slaughtering entire families out of rage-fueled instincts. No one could stop me. I had no sense to stop it, but I was present enough to watch.

“I still hear their screams at night. The grieving wails of mothers while I took their children from them before they became my next target. I would have never stopped. But one day I came across a witch near her cottage. A powerful one.

“She couldn’t break the curse, since she wasn’t the one to cast it, but when she rallied her defenses and hit me with her magic, it decimated the barrier that’d suppressed the real me. For a long time, I wished she would have just killed me. To live with the memories and guilt of the carnage I caused...”

Her heart rate sped and slowed as I divulged the deepest regrets I carried.

“So, yes. I know what it’s like. I know the burden. I’m sorry you do, too, I just...I wanted you to know you’re not alone in that.”

Each beat in my chest pained from anticipation of her reaction. If she summoned the strength to force me away, I would let her. If she looked me in the eyes with disgust and terror, telling me she never wanted to lay eyes on me again, I’d never make her.

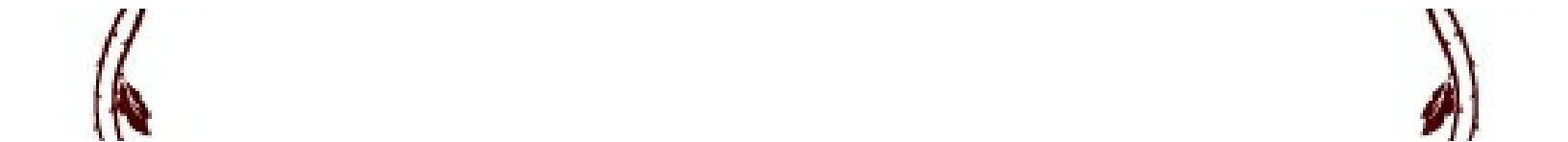
It would break me, but I’d do it.

That day we’d made snow angels, she’d bared her trauma, her pain. While she’d laid limp in my arms, I’d thought about all this world had taken from her. She deserved more. It may not have been much, but this piece of mine was something I could give in return.

Tension in her body melted, easing deeper into my hold. My mind whirled. Had I just killed her spirit again, like how she’d

slipped into a husk of herself upon first arriving here? If I had, I didn't know what I—
She returned a gentle squeeze to my arm. "I'm sorry, too." Her delicate whisper carried the sorrow we both shared.
We lay in each other's arms, knowing the deepest parts of the shadows painted on our souls.
But I would live in her shadows, take them on for myself—if she'd let me.

Mira



How I actually managed to sleep after being unconscious most of the previous day, I didn't know. Faint evidence of morning light glowed around the darkening curtains.

Dante's arms remained encircled around me, and my heart felt at peace.

I never wanted to leave. Wrapped in his caring embrace, surrounded by his strength, accepted for my demons, seen for more than my gift. These feelings were so foreign, and yet my soul knew it'd been searching for this.

He'd been a human before. When he'd told me, I realized what I'd recognized behind his big brown wolf eyes—a human soul. A person with the burden of a curse.

If that wasn't the most relatable thing.

Since I'd been given this blessing, it encompassed my life. Placed me in a bubble, isolating me from the world. No one could ever understand what it'd done, taken, changed about me, regardless of whether I explained or not.

But he did.

Our connection made more sense, why I'd been drawn to him. Threads of fate connected our lives, woven into a tapestry by the gods. That's why being around him felt like standing under the warm sun. Designed by destiny to meet. A matching soul to mine.

Never had something been so clear. I twisted under his hold until I faced him. To my surprise, intoxicating brown eyes already stared down at me.

"Oh, hi," I said, a smile brimming on my lips.

"Hey, green eyes." The low rumbling from his chest sent goosebumps dancing along my spine.

Staring past the barrel of his snout into his dark gaze, I'd never been more relaxed.

"How do you feel?" he asked.

"I'm okay, truly."

Bringing the tip of his nose down, he pressed it against my forehead. Cold, and a little wet, it drew a laugh from my belly and made my nose crinkle.

He pulled away, unfazed by my amusement. "You don't seem to have a fever."

"I could have told you that," I replied with a smile, wiping the back of my hand across the newly placed moisture on my forehead.

The way he looked at me had my senses spinning. For a moment, I could do nothing but sink into his affectionate gaze. Gravity felt lighter, but I knew I wouldn't float away. He would never allow that to happen. Of that I was certain.

"Mira," he spoke my name in such a way that I knew it would pair with something.

"Yes?" Curiosity bubbled within my chest, along with warm anticipation.

Seconds stretched out, and I waited with bated breath, our stares locked by something tangible.

Thundering footsteps stormed down the hallway, and the bedroom door burst open.

"Mira's not in her—Oh." Jasper barged in, relaying a panicked message until his eyes fell upon the sight of us, limbs intertwined in Dante's bed. A boyish smirk spread over his face, pulling his features higher on one side.

Embarrassment scolded me, instincts screaming at me to hide away. But when I went to pull back, I was met with resistance. I snapped my gaze to Dante, who simply stared at Jasper in the doorway.

"She's fine."

The way he didn't flinch, didn't hold a lick of shame about being caught with me was intoxicating. I knew what it was for someone to place their ownership over me, preventing others from access, hiding me away, but this was different.

I think it was pride.

"I see that," Jasper snickered. "Weeeell, I'll just head back out then." He backed out of the room with exaggerated strides

and slipped around the corner.

Dante faced me again, and I rested my palms against his soft, furry chest.

“Are you hungry?” he asked, as if we hadn’t just been caught in an intimate fashion by the one person who might very well tell all of Argora Vale.

A smile graced my lips. “Starving.”



There may have been a slight draft that infiltrated the kitchen, but sitting at the island, surrounded by these people who’d I’d grown to know and connect with more than anyone else in my life had it feeling like the warmest room in the manor.

Calista dished up eggs with green flecks. I’d occasionally catch Jasper staring, eyes shifting between Dante and myself, but he’d drop his gaze quickly. I internally counted down the minutes until he brought up how he’d found us this morning. Instead, he shoveled spoonful after spoonful into his mouth, as if needing something to block whatever he wanted to say.

“Mm, Calista, I don’t know how you do it,” he said around the chewed piles in his cheeks.

“It’s basil,” she replied, dryly.

He hummed a contemplative sound. “No, that’s not it. It’s something else. I’ll figure it out one day.”

She huffed a laugh and rolled her eyes as she sat down to join us. “What time is Alaina coming over today?”

He worked to force down the mound in his mouth. “I told her early afternoon, so that I could already have my first attempts finished. Who knows, they might be good enough and she won’t even need to use her magic.”

Calista quickly filled her mouth with a forkful of eggs and simply smiled with a non-committal noise.

Dante sat closer to me at the table, his furry thigh nearly grazing my own.

“Mm,” Jasper released a mumbled sound, furrowing his brow. “You need to take those buckets.”

“I can’t,” Dante replied.

“What do you mean?” Calista probed.

“I’m not leaving Mira,” he stated coolly.

The other two exchanged a questioning glance, but didn’t say anything.

Dante didn’t comment further, only kept staring down at his diminishing plate of eggs. The thought of him leaving caused an uncomfortable ache in my chest, but being the reason he didn’t help with the famine would go against what I was trying to accomplish.

“You should go,” the words spilled out, smooth as butter, as if I held zero internal objections.

He lifted his gaze. Doubt raced across his eyes, and I knew I needed to press harder.

“I’ll be fine.” I offered a reassuring smile and placed my hand on his arm that rested on the tabletop. When he still didn’t look convinced, I amended, “Well, I don’t feel up for any walks today.” I retracted my hand and raised my shoulders. “Besides, Jasper needs someone to chat with while he bakes.”

“My number one baking assistant! Or, at least, baking bystander.” Jasper moved around the island to my side, giving me a high five.

The beast to my left targeted the jovial gargoyle with deadly precision. “You don’t let her out of your sight this time,” he growled. The pent up reprimand hit the room as viscerally as a slap in the face.

“We won’t,” Calista slid her hand out on the table, a gesture of peace paired with her soft words.

Dante’s eyes bounced between the other two before coming back to me. “Are you sure?”

“I am. I’ll be right here when you get back.” I waved my hands over the island. The thought of him coming back to me placed a genuine smile on my lips. I’d never wanted someone to return to me so badly.

“I’ve heard rumor that more wielders are getting uneasy and have started traveling down to Highcrest. If that’s true, I’ll bet good money that the ogres are lurking down there now,” Calista said.

Dante nodded. He rose from the table, and in the most tender public act, leaned down and placed a kiss on the crown of my head. Butterflies swarmed to life in my chest. His paw stroked my cheek and cupped my jaw before it fell as he went and gathered the tarnished silver buckets filled with foul smelling blood that’d started to thicken.

My eyes remained fixed on his every move until he stood at the door. With a last glance between us, he headed out.



“Well?!” Jasper’s eyes glistened like a toddler seeking praise.

Calista, Alaina and I chewed the mounds of soggy cake in our mouths. When he’d divided up the pieces, and the bottom looked to have runny egg yolk still inside, I didn’t hold much hope. But we all showed our support and now had to suffer the consequences.

My gaze volleyed between the two girls, whose faces were set in deep contemplation. Their mouths rolled slowly, working the thick paste in their mouths. I chose to swallow mine quickly. Not all of my captors had been chefs, and I’d learned to cope.

Seconds ticked by and the hopeful delight in Jasper’s eyes dwindled until his features fell flat. “You hate it.”

“Um,” Calista said in a high-pitched tenor. “It almost looked like a real cake!” She clearly battled the line between being supportive and not outright lying.

Jasper’s eyes narrowed.

“Hun, it wasn’t cooked all the way. You see how it’s wet? Yeah, that’s not supposed to be like that. Of course it doesn’t taste good.” Alaina didn’t care to hold back, apparently.

“I thought it just meant it was really moist.” Jasper shrugged, leaning over to scrutinize the abomination on the plate.

As if it wasn’t noticeable from across the room.

“Here,” Alaina said. She raised her hands, and a white glow shone from her palms.

The remaining cake disassembled before my eyes, separating until it sat in an organized pile of ingredients. Even the broken yolk reassembled into an unbroken egg.

“Now I want you to try again, but this time, we’re going to mix properly.” She picked up the plate of ingredients and handed it to Jasper.

“Mix more. Got it.” He went to work, gathering his mixing bowl and spoon. He hadn’t even brought that out last time.

When I’d grown uncomfortable in my chair, I dismissed myself to the library. I pulled a few books and returned to my bed to get comfortable. Part of me considered setting up in Dante’s room, but if one of the others came looking for me, I’d have been too embarrassed.

Apparently I’d dozed off. Soft voices carrying down the hallway brought me back to life, and the book I’d been reading was sprawled open against my chest. Sliding into my slippers, I got out of bed and approached the front door as Calista said her goodbyes to Alaina.

“Ah, see, if we were smart, we would have slinked away like Mira did instead of doing all those taste tests.” Alaina gave me a one-sided smirk.

Releasing a breathy laugh, I asked, “You guys done for the day? How’d it go?”

“Baking is *not* easy,” Jasper said from the couch, massaging his shoulder as he worked it in its socket.

“But he’s improving!” Calista tossed out the encouragement, and Jasper lost the battle trying to hide his proud grin.

I hadn’t realized at first, but there was no more sunshine. “It’s evening?”

“Yup. And I am exhausted.” Alaina turned the knob, cracking open the door, letting a snap of cold air wash over us. “Take me home, big guy.”

“Fly safe,” Calista said before aligning with my side and throwing her arm over my shoulder.

“Always do,” Jasper replied as he came to the door and scooped Alaina into his arms. After he took a step outside, they launched into the night.

Calista shut the front door, doing a little shimmy. “Brrr.”

“Do you ever fly with him? What’s it like?” Imagining the world from that height made my stomach twist.

“It looks amazing. Better in the summer though, when it’s not cold as shit.” She walked into the parlor, grabbed an iron poker, and prodded the fire, causing red embers to soar around it.

At first I thought the lights dancing through the window were just a reflection, but when I paid attention, I realized it wasn’t. “What is that?” I asked, mainly to myself as I crawled onto the sofa with my knees and placed my hands on the back.

“What’s what?” she asked.

“Those lights out there.”

“Oh, those are twinklers,” she stated casually, as if I should know what that means.

“Twinklers?” I glanced at her, probing for more information.

“Yeah, little creatures that hold a tiny fragment of light magic. That’s *right*, they don’t exist in Highcrest.”

I shook my head, fascinated at the little stars dancing in the open air. I dropped to my elbows, resting my chin in my palms. They were beautiful, yet lived in this kingdom of all places where darkness rotted the land. Existed in a world of dark, yet

they still shone.

"They like to gather in the courtyard. You can catch them there."

"You can?!" I shot up, already making my way there before pivoting to retrieve my cloak that'd been hanging by the fire since yesterday.

Calista laughed. "I'll be out there in a minute. I'm just going to double check the coup. Whatever you do, don't shake them, though! They hate that."

That thought would literally never cross my mind. I wouldn't like to be shaken either.

Stopping at my room, I put on my boots, knowing my slippers wouldn't do well outside for long. I paused, considering if I should go outside or not. If I never felt the cold again, it'd be too soon. Yet, those little lights were so intriguing, I could spare a few minutes. After dressing properly, I made my way to the courtyard.

A couple dozen tiny lights whirled around the enclosed space. A few shot up into the night when I entered, so I changed my approach, moving slower. Some danced in pairs or groups, while others wandered off on their own.

Stepping closer to the fountain where a bundle of them hovered around, I extended my palm, scooping into the group.

A few fell away, but one remained, right in the center. I studied it in total awe. Closer up, I could see the light twinkling, like flickering starlight.

In a blink, they all swarmed away up into the night. They traveled out of the courtyard, and before my disappointment could set in, fear did.

Footsteps sounded through the open door from down the hallway. Booted footsteps. Belonging to multiple people.

No.

I froze, trying to make sense of the sound, desperately searching to come up with a reason. Deep down, I knew who they belonged to. I'd heard that rhythm countless times under the blanket of nightfall.

Snow crunched behind me, breaking the serenity of the quiet courtyard. I turned to see large bodies barreling through. They grabbed me before I could speak, a hand hooking over my mouth, silencing any attempt at protest.

I pulled and kicked, but couldn't alter their strides. Yet I didn't stop. I refused to stop, even as their grips sunk firmly into my skin hard enough to bruise.

They'd already pulled me from the courtyard, and with every inch they gained, anger raged through my veins. I twisted. Contorted. Yanked. Kicked. Anything I could try, every single angle I could move my body in an effort to resist, I did.

I didn't want to leave. This was my home. These creatures were my friends. Their faces played in my mind. The laughter we'd shared, the kindness they'd shown, and the purpose I had here.

They were the closest thing to family I'd ever had. Despite having utterly no effect on the brutes lugging me through the hall, I continued to fight.

The front door came into view, and I thrashed harder.

"Let me go!" I attempted to scream into the hand that was fastened over my mouth. The words weren't audible.

Reality crashed over me in a brutal wave, sending my stomach sinking toward the floor. I shook my head in protest as the foyer approached too quickly. Never in my life had I been able to return once I'd been taken. That thought caused hot tears to pool in my eyes, and a scream of desperation scratched its way up my throat as they hauled me over the threshold.

I don't want to leave; I don't want to go!

My dreams shattered on the snow covered grounds in front of the manor, hopelessness forming within tears of anger. Still, I struggled.

But to no avail.

Dante

The ogres grumbled a little too much after I'd trekked all day to hunt them down. If I didn't grasp all of their muttered language, their groans and wrinkled foreheads communicated all I needed to know.

They had to stir the congealing offering with a stick. I knew I'd waited too long, but a meal was a meal. A daunting reality we might all soon face.

Then I'd continued south. Nightfall made my task difficult, but succeeding reinvigorated me. The scent of dozens of people filtered through the desolate forest, no doubt guardsmen scouring for Mira. Irritation bloomed in me over the fact that they'd yet to let her go, hunting her for her magic. Though, at this point, I would never let her go, either.

I traveled at a pretty consistent rate. The thought of a red-haired, green-eyed beauty waiting for me kept my spirits high. The stars in the firmament shone brighter tonight, practically lighting the way to guide me home.

Home.

No longer just four walls for restraint. No longer just a hangout spot for my few friends.

A place where my heart belonged.

I didn't know how long it would take for her magic to work, but for a variety of reasons, I cared less.

Time with her was what mattered. To see her discover new things. To learn. To laugh. To share the thoughts she'd spent a lifetime hiding.

A version of me without her no longer existed. She'd held a candle to my darkness, saw the truth of the beast inside, and still, she didn't run. She didn't cower. Didn't fear. Instead, those emerald eyes peered straight into my soul, to the barest parts of me, and she did not blink.

Now, I became a version of myself that existed to serve her. To care for her. Protect her. Accept her. Hurt with her, and most importantly, make up for the life she'd been forced to live.

My steady steps trampled the forest floor, breaking the undisturbed layer of thick white. Even this dead forest looked more alive with her here. The back of the manor finally came into view, the silhouette highlighted by the glow of the crescent moon. That was probably the fastest I'd ever traveled, but every labored breath or strained muscle would vanish the moment I saw her smile.

Climbing up the slight incline of the back grounds, excitement spurred me forward, but vanished just as quickly.

The faint tang of blood wafting through the air cemented my feet in place. Following the trail on the wind, I picked up Calista's scent. My wolf vision scoped the odd shadow placed between the coup and the manor.

My fur stood on end, and I bolted over with giant steps. "Calista?" I reached for her, snagging the mound of rope that constricted her body and dragged her out.

Her head flopped around, an active cut staining the side of her face with blood. Her eyes fluttered, and she groaned in pain. One swipe of my extended claw split the rope, and it unraveled to the ground. Without waiting for her to adjust, I scooped her up and hastily brought us inside.

Barging through the door, I didn't even care to close it behind me. I moved us to the parlor and gently rested Calista on the sofa before storming down the hall.

"MIRA!" I called. The manor quaked beneath my thundering steps until I stood before her room's open door.

Not there.

Remnants of her scent lingered in the hallway, but weakened the deeper I tread into the manor. Nostrils twitching, I bolted for the library. The open door to the courtyard snagged my attention, but when I found it empty, I lurched in place.

Multiple sets of footprints.

There'd been a struggle. Heat boiled inside of me, threatening to erupt and scorch the earth in a fiery rage. My nose worked to detect whoever dared mess with my family, but nothing came.

Fucking magic. Someone had covered their tracks. My ears pinned to my head when I heard the subtle sound of the front door opening. I ripped around the corner, barreling down the hallway, bringing myself face-to-face with Jasper within seconds, barely able to stop myself from the anger-fueled haze that raced through my blood like a violent current.

“WHERE IS SHE?” I screamed, cried, hurtled at him.

“What? Who? What’s going on?” His voice dropped, seeing my state.

“Mira! Someone’s taken Mira.” I growled, pointing at Calista on the couch.

“Shit. Cal.” Jasper rushed to her side, stroking the blood covered hair out of her face.

“WHERE WERE YOU?!” Unable to hold back, I rushed Jasper, wrapping my paws around his arms and raising him in the air.

“King. Calm down.”

I could barely hear him over my labored, snarled breathing. My blood prickled, a feeling I recognized. It snapped me back, and I dropped him, stumbling backward to put space between us before I did any real damage. There was no trace of fear on my friend’s stony face, though with the way control was slipping from my grasp, there should be.

“Shit,” Jasper mumbled a string of curses as the weight of the situation fell on him. “Who even knew she was here?!”

Paws clenching by my sides, I said, “I would have covered half the fucking kingdom by now if I could have picked them up. They’ve covered their scents.”

“How long?” Jasper knelt before Calista.

“I don’t know, I blacked out,” she muttered, eyes nearly rolling back in her head. Shadows scorched her cheek where she’d taken a devastating blow.

“Tracks. Outside, there’s tracks.” Jasper stood and ran out the door. We gazed over the front yard, spotting the trail that led straight to the front door and the others that’d wrapped around the back.

Fucking organized. This had been planned.

Not caring that my body grew weary from an entire day of travel across the forest, I raced along the tracks left behind until they joined with wagon marks. Under the moonlight, I could see they headed toward the main roads where multiple carts traveled in a day. Without a scent, I wouldn’t be able to pinpoint which trail to follow.

A roar of anger ripped through me as I snarled into the night sky. Depending how far they’d gotten, they might’ve heard it. A desperate attempt for me to reach Mira, to let her know I knew, and I would find her.

Storming back into the manor, my head became dazed in a tide of frantic thoughts. “Calista, tell me everything you remember.”

Jasper had returned inside, holding her upright on the sofa, a hand towel of wrapped snow placed over her cut. She sealed her eyes shut, brows pinching together as she fought to recall her memory through the no doubt thumping pain radiating through her skull.

“I-I was out doing a last check of the coup. I told Mira I’d join her in the courtyard. She’d seen twinklers for the first time, and I told her she could get up close in the courtyard and that I would join her after I checked.

“Once I saw the latch was secure, I said goodnight to the hens. By the time I heard any sort of sound, a splitting pain erupted in my head. The next thing I remember is the rope loosening, and you setting me down here.” She winced, still grappling with consciousness.

My warm, animalistic blood turned cold in my veins as I swallowed the truth before she said it.

“I didn’t see who it was.”

Not even gravity felt like it could tether me. “Jasper, did you see any movement on the roads while you flew? In any direction?” I did my best to keep my rising tide of anger at bay. I had to stay in control.

“No, no one. I came from Hu’s fathers after dropping off Alaina.” His disposition sank until he straightened with vigor. “That means they must’ve headed west down the main roads!”

“Let’s go. Calista, we’ll send a healer as soon as we can.” I turned to move before Calista interjected, no other thoughts present besides getting to Mira as quickly as possible.

“Wait, let me help.” She struggled to get to her feet.

“You’ll only hold us back.” I didn’t coat my words. In her condition, she couldn’t keep up. Risking her to the elements would help no one.

“No, let me use my magic.” She pushed herself up from the sofa, grimacing with each movement. Jasper went to her side, ducking under her arm to help her forward.

A spark of hope ignited. Finding Mira’s exact location would be the fastest way to get to her instead of stumbling around in the dark. I felt foolish for not considering it sooner, but Calista appeared in no shape to wield, and the strain in my heart grew with every passing second that Mira slipped further from my grasp. It took but a few moments to set her crystal ball on the board game and get to work, but she fought through like a champ.

When she tried summoning Mira, she couldn’t. Part of me already suspected that, but I couldn’t help but hope. “She’s being shielded. It’s why I can’t scent them.” A red haze began creeping into the corners of my vision.

Jasper and I slung suggestions her way, and she'd bring up the locations in the crystal. With each passing scene not revealing any clues, my temper flared. My inner beast clawed and thrashed to escape, causing my blood to prickle with the same pain I'd experienced when Bonnie first changed me.

My tongue grew slick from the growing desire to tear into the flesh that stole Mira, and taste the warm blood, smell their fear from my punishment.

Jasper and Calista kept trying random areas of the kingdom after we'd gone through the inventory of people we knew. The blacksmith sat at home with his family. Evenita knocked on the door of an unlit cottage. Marxia slept in her traveling caravan surrounded by garments. A few of the families I delivered to were all in their homes.

"Wait," Jasper said, something poignant in his tone. "Try Marvoe."

Calista arched her brow in question, but hovered her hands over the crystal anyway. Once the fog dissipated, it revealed Marvoe sharpening knives as he spoke to another.

"Things are falling into place quite nicely. The gods are definitely showing us they're on our side," he crooned, a crooked smile curving his mouth.

The other man chuckled in agreement, arms crossed over his bulging chest. Marvoe held the blade to the light in front of him, admiring the shine of the freshly sharpened metal. When he turned and took a step forward, another came into view.

Mira.



Mira



The rope binding my wrists burned my skin with every subtle twist. With my feet and midsection also bound, my hands needed to get free first.

I worked when their backs were turned, or they'd left the room. They'd tied me to an angled board, which had me standing nearly completely upright.

Metal rang against metal, making a cold sweat break out over my skin. In all my nightmares about my powers being discovered, it led to something like this. Tortured for it.

The blade's shrill song rang out into the room again, every pulse of the thrumming sound waves singing a call to death.

But I didn't stop. With each pull of tension against the rope, maybe I could loosen it enough. Gods, it was tight, though. My progress felt virtually non-existent.

"That couldn't have gone easier," the brute leaning against the wall said, lazily looking at his fingernail.

"Things are falling into place quite nicely. The gods are definitely showing us they're on our side," the black-haired man said.

From what I could tell, he'd executed the order to steal me. The other man laughed. The enjoyment he took from this made me sick to my stomach.

"Check on Dunstan. Tell him he needs to keep up the shield for just a bit longer," the black-haired man said.

"You got it, Marvoe." He left the room, leaving me and my now mortal enemy alone.

The glint of firelight on the pointed tip of the great knife Marvoe held out stole my focus. He turned, facing me with the weapon. I squirmed harder under my restraints, not caring if he saw my attempt.

His gentle, easy steps made my body quiver. No anger, no malice, not even greed appeared on his chiseled features. Only content happiness. Somehow, that was scarier. His shirt was buttoned to the top of his neck, oddly formal.

"W-what do you want from me?" I choked out.

He tilted his head to the side, pushing out his bottom lip. "Oh, dear. I want your magic," he said, as if it couldn't possibly be anything else.

This situation was unlike any other I'd faced as The Coveted, but I wasn't the same girl I had been. I'd recently learned that my voice held power, and I was going to use it. "Hurting me won't make it work. Others have tried."

"Then how does it work?" he furrowed his brow, placing his hands behind his back—taking that menacing knife with them.

Knowing I'd caught his attention, and created distance between me and that lethal blade, I hoped I could figure out exactly what I needed to get myself free.

"How did you find me?" My brows knitted together of their own volition.

He released a soft chuckle, shaking his head at the ground. "You shouldn't flaunt that distinct hair of yours if you don't want attention. A mercy from the gods that I spotted you in the market that day, really."

How? I'd been so careful, always wearing my hood and tucking my hai—except for when Jasper gave me a high five and it slipped off. My heart felt too full of friendship over my new dresses to immediately cover it.

"It's not what they say—my magic," I spit out. Not only did I want to finally break this cycle, but it seemed this might actually be my end.

I wouldn't let it. Not now. "I have to know your desires."

He hummed in contemplation. "Hm. My desires?"

"Yes," I snapped out.

He dropped his gaze to the ground, inhaling sharply while he began pacing in front of me. "My desires are great." He looked at me with a smile gushing with pride and disappeared as he circled my board.

When he vanished from view, I gulped the lump in my throat, feeling more helpless, hopeless, powerless. I fought against the

burn on my wrists.

"Few people make history in this world. Make a difference. And until now, those who have, have continued to hold their feet over our necks." Venom dripped from his words. "It's taken time, but more and more are understanding that living this way is no longer a viable option. Do you think it's fair that a weakness in some has a dictating say in the strength of others?"

I feared responding might make my situation worse, so I remained silent. When he rounded the board and saw my decision, his smile returned.

"You, my dear, aware or not, are going to help right wrongs." He stopped squarely in front of me and held his arms out wide. My gaze targeted the still uncomfortably sharp knife in his hand.

"That's not how you get my powers to work. I control them. If you hurt me, I won't help you." Truth, just not in the way he thought. I tilted my chin higher, portraying a false sense of confident resolve, hoping he'd respond to it.

His arms dropped, going slack at his sides. A single, breathy laugh came out. "If I thought I needed your permission, do you think I would have taken you this way?"

My heart slammed against my chest, the sands of time slipping through my fingertips with each passing second.

"Because of those without power being threatened by those who have it, magical abilities are being watered down with each new generation. If nothing is done to stop it, eventually, it'll disappear all together. We have no hope in defeating the enemy with half-cocked magic. Which is where you come in."

He stepped forward at the same time another one of his goons returned. He raised the knife. I screamed and squirmed, unmoving from my entrapment. I'd squinted and looked away, confused by the sound of ripping clothing until I brought my gaze back. He'd sliced down my cape and the fabric of my shirt, exposing my bare arm.

The muscled goon readied his hands over my arm. Marvoe angled the pointed tip of the blade at my arm, and my breath hitched as he brought it close.

"This will only hurt for a moment." His jovial tone had my gut churning with fear.

"NO!" Sharp steel sliced into my skin, and I cried out, but only for a moment... because it stopped. Breathing rapidly, I glanced down at the cut. The man to my side used his magic to control the flow of my blood in a stream that wrapped through the air like a ribbon until it fed itself into a large wooden bowl. Scattered around it on the countertop were a variety of crystals, some glowing in a way that made me question what I was seeing.

My nervous eyes darted between them. "What are you doing?"

"You are no witch, dear, but magic still runs through your veins," Marvoe said, clasping his hands and the blade tainted with my blood behind his back.

A dark wave of realization crashed over me. He wouldn't wait for my magic to work.

He would steal it.

Running out of any other option, I pleaded, "It doesn't work the way you think!"

He barely seemed fazed by my statement, so I continued, "It doesn't grant your desires! People only think it does. I'm cursed to be coveted. You only want it because of a spell designed to lure you. It does nothing!" Mostly truth.

His dark eyes flicked up to me. They assessed mine. Raising his fingers to his chin, he massaged the bone.

Maybe that would be enough to save me, admitting out loud that I couldn't do what he thought. Why would he want my blood if it wouldn't grant him his desires?

He took a long, deep inhale through his nose, then released a quick breath. "I appreciate your honesty, but I'm sure I can still find use for it." Then he turned on his heel and walked out of the room.

"No! Wait! Stop!" I cried and struggled under the ropes. The wielder to my right still controlled my flowing blood stream. Judging by the size of the bowl they were filling, reality set in that a little wouldn't satisfy his wants. He'd take every last drop.

"Please, you don't have to do this. You can stop this. You don't have to listen to him!" A surge of nausea and lightheadedness hit. My focus switched from trying to save myself to fighting off the sickness my blood loss caused.

It would only get worse. Eventually I'd pass out, and never open my eyes again. After a lifetime of being cursed, I'd somehow found happiness. Relationships. A life. Purpose. Only to have it ripped away the moment things could have really changed.

My lips twitched into a smile as my head started to sway. A tear ran down my cheek, carrying with it all of my sadness, regret, my worst memories and my recent best. I didn't know when my eyes had fallen closed, or for how long, when a crashing bang yanked me back to the present.

Dante



Wandering Argora Vale for decades had at least one advantage: location recognizability. When Calista searched her crystal ball, I knew there was only one abandoned manor they could be. As if a star had long ago crashed to the earth, the manor rested in the center of a forest-covered crater. Accessibility to the main roads had been obliterated when the dark magic spread, leaving this home deserted and unlivable.

A perfect location for a group such as this to set up camp undetected. From the outskirts of the crater, I could scent multiple beings. Their magic had a distinct smell, something I had only ever detected on one person before.

The beast inside me was clawing at the walls to be unleashed while Calista withdrew her crystal from her pack and scoped out the property.

“Two main guards outside the gate,” she stated.

“Any hints of abilities?” I asked. Confident in my own strength, sure, but a fire wielder would cause me significant problems if I wasn’t prepared.

“One is a kinetic. He’s levitating rocks. He looks bored.”

“Well, lucky for us his job is boring. Hopefully that means they’re less inclined to be sharp lookouts. What about inside?”

She motioned her hands over the glass. “It’s a fairly big compound. High ceilings. That’ll work well for you. In a room off to the left, there’s four of them. Three dudes and a chick. They’re sitting around playing cards, but there’s a cache of weapons on the walls.

“The kitchen is off to the right. There’s two in there. I think they’re both herbalists from the way they’re tending to the plants.”

“Find Marvoe.” I snarled.

Calista motioned her hands, and the fog cleared away to reveal Marvoe staring at himself in a standing oval mirror, adjusting the collar of his high neck shirt. He grazed his fingers along the rim, pulling it slightly to reveal black ink marks along his skin. I swore I could detect his sour-tainted scent from here.

“Found him.”

My feet pressed harder into the snow, searching for something to keep me planted instead of taking off to tear his limbs apart. My blood prickled in another wave. If I couldn’t find her, if we’d been too late, if they’d shipped her off elsewhere...

A moment passed, and Calista didn’t speak. The crystal revealed nothing but fog.

“Calista.”

“I’m trying. Someone is still casting a shield over her. It must be someone in the house, but I can’t tell which one.”

My vision flared red. “Where is she.”

Calista peered around the room, a different one than before. No Mira in sight.

“Check all the rooms.”

Rustling behind us made me stand to my fullest height, paw reared back and ready to strike, when Jasper emerged from the trees.

“Woah, easy big dog,” Jasper said, holding his hands up. He had gone to collect Hu and Alaina while Calista and I ran straight to the abandoned manor. We filled them in on what we knew, discussing the magical beings positioned around the manor and devised a plan of attack.

While I held no qualms about leading the charge, when Calista instructed Jasper to retrieve Mira, something in me refused. I insisted that I be the one to get her. Calista tried talking me out of it, fearing that I might lose myself to my animal fury once inside, but I was the only one of us capable of taking down any who dared to stop Mira from getting out.

We agreed and I left them, weaving through the forest to enter from the back so I could avoid the front gate guards. Not one person patrolled back here. The only door was covered in chains, but a second story window remained open. A normal

creature couldn't reach that high. Luckily for me, that wasn't a problem.

I stalked the grounds, quieting my approach. When I couldn't sense anyone in the open room, I jumped, latching my claws around the frame and hoisting myself up. Squeezing through the small frame was a struggle, but I managed.

I will find you, green eyes, and take down anyone who gets in my way.

My blood prickled, but I focused on moving stealthily down the corridor. Checking all the rooms, my judgment had been correct. No one up here. I loomed over the top of the stairs and heard the moment the commotion started out front.

Their people ran out the front toward the noise. Not all, but the less I had to cut down, the better. Capitalizing on the distraction, I leapt down the stairs, landing on the first floor. I twisted around with fierce speed and barreled down the corridor.

Blood.

The scent soured my nostrils. Ramming the door, it broke off the hinges, and a horrifying sight fell before me.

Mira had been bound, her blood floating through the air into an alarmingly full bucket. The wielder bending it broke his concentration when he beheld me and the suspended stream splattered on the floor.

The prickling sensation in my blood heightened, sharp razor blades slicing through me. A roar that'd been dragged from the depths of my soul careened forward, rattling loose a cage that'd been in place for years. That raw power erupted, shattering any will, any thoughts I had. Bones contorted, becoming more angular, slicing my muscles to make space.

My mouth salivated so heavily that drool spilled from the sides, unbridled urges surging forward. In my sights were two beating hearts, one much stronger than the other. It called to me, that thunderous beat, like a melody. A summoning song drawing all of my instincts to hone in on my target. My only desire became sinking my teeth into warm flesh, tearing him to shreds, and filling my belly with his still pulsing organs.

I slashed, an unstoppable force cutting the air. It painted the wall and floor red, and his screams of terror and horrible pain rang out. His eye hung from its socket due to the gash across his face, matching ones paralleled lower on his body, across his chest and arm. Blood and fear mixed together, creating an intoxicating flavor.

He lay on the ground, inching back toward the wall, holding his hand out to try and keep me at bay.

A tempting offering that I gladly took. Bones crunched between my razor-sharp teeth, and I felt restored, a powerful high that stirred the drive for more.

A throat shredding scream ripped from him as he stared at the stump I'd left him with.

Voices behind me cursed my presence. I whirled around, glaring at those who had gathered. Terror and urine soaked the hallway before they scrambled to retreat, leaving me to my current meal in peace.

I pinned him with my foot, easily sinking my claws into his flesh. With one solitary, focused motion, I ripped him apart, sending equal halves of his torso on either side of the floor. My tongue lapped the ground, devouring the trove of innards.

I savored every morsel, recognizing it'd been a long time since I'd satisfied the hunger. I'd forgotten I wasn't alone until I picked up the faint heartbeat that was still present in the room. Turning my attention back to the woman on the board, I peered down at her.

I couldn't smell her, and if it wasn't for her heartbeat, I'd question if she was even alive. Her heavy eyes fluttered.

"Dante, I know you're in there. You can fight this. You are in control. You came to save me because you are a *good man*," she muttered.

My ears pinned back. Her quiet words settled over my skin like a caress. Something started happening. A fog lifted, culling the insatiable need to feed. And as the haze dissipated, clarity returned.

Mira.

Memories of her face, moments where she'd looked at me, her green eyes penetrating my very soul, were the first to return. Then Jasper and Calista. Then the mission of saving the kingdom.

My bones retracted, popping out of place and sinking into my frame. She'd been taken, and I'd come here to find her. The hunger faded entirely, and once again I came back to myself.

Wasting no time, I sliced through the ropes restraining her and caught her falling body in my arms.

"I'm here, Mira. I've got you. You're going to be okay." She had to be.

I carried her out of the room, leading us down the hall. Feeling her so limp in my arms had the beast inside scratching to release, to take down every single person that'd done this to her. But she needed me.

The front doors remained wide-open, glimpses of fighting bodies passing by. Objects and animals tossed to and fro, green light flashing in bursts against the night.

Alaina's magic, that's what Mira needed.

I stepped through the threshold into the chilled night air. Calista was in the midst, though she'd intended to stay behind. She used her power in a way I'd never seen, tossing branches through the air, smacking those who tried to attack her, sending them tumbling to the ground.

The guards on patrol were bound in vines and roots—Hu's herbalist magic. A wind wielder focused their attention on the flying gargoyle above, trying to blast him out of the sky. They held no chance against his speed.

A wolf prowled the ground, a shifted form. In the distance, a few of their accomplices dashed up the crater and into the woods.

Alaina continually reversed the two men running at her back a few feet on repeat. They shouted demands for her surrender, as if they wanted her next. The half-changed bull man charged at her again, his frustration tainting the air when he returned to where he'd started.

Marvoe was nowhere to be found.

The fight was evenly matched. I could see my friends' exhaustion taking over, smell their sweat and growing fatigue. My arms shook, an internal battle over whether I should set her down and fight, or never let her go.

Jasper swooped down, plucking the morphed wolf from the ground and bringing him into the air before letting go. He plummeted in the distance with a shrieking howl before it fell silent.

A woman raised a mallet, about to bring it down on Hu. Dried, tangled vines snaked across the ground from where he stood, his herbalist magic severely dwindled by now. He didn't have enough defenses to combat the weapon poised to strike. And I couldn't get there in time.

Hu held his arm out, shielding himself as the hammer came down with deliberate force.

"HU!" Alaina cried, watching from a distance as her brother was about to meet his end.

Her green magic was concentrated on the two swarming her, but the light was merely a faint glow. Her attackers gained ground. She'd almost drained her magic to the dregs. She didn't have enough remaining to reverse a fatal wound.

Then a gray blur flew through the air, intercepting the swing. Jasper turned himself to stone, taking the impact. The sound that echoed into the woods chilled my very blood.

The gargoyle statue crumbled into scattered fragments on the ground. Hu screamed his love's name as he beheld the rolling pebbles, heartache formed into sound.

Grief clutched my heart, nearly knocking the wind out of me as I stared at the motionless stone broken on the ground.

"NO!" Calista's shriek rang out into the night, and she sent the speared pointed end of a branch hurtling through the air. The woman turned just in time to be pierced through the chest by the anger-fueled strike.

She stumbled to the ground, gurgling the blood that filled her lungs from the lethal wound. Hu sat on his knees, reaching to touch the crumbled remains, shaking his head in disbelief.

"ENOUGH!" Marvoe called out, something dark and malicious in his booming demand.

We turned to see him holding a knife to Alaina's throat.

"Don't," Hu weakly raised a hand out, barely anything left in him to fight, but managed to swallow his bleeding emotions to plead for his sister.

Calista had exerted the rest of her strength with that last attack, and she could barely keep herself sitting upright on the ground. Her staggered breaths clouded the air.

"Marvoe, it's done," I said, holding the woman I loved still fighting for her life, standing near the rubble remains of my best friend. "If you kill her, you won't make it one foot away from this place before I scatter your shredded remains all over this cursed forest." Anger seared every word, branding it with a vengeful heat.

I lowered Mira to the ground, placing her gently to free my arms, ready to fulfill my promise. Rising to my full stature, my claws were poised, ready to strike.

He whispered something into Alaina's ear that made her brow crease, then he addressed the rest of us. "She walks with me to the forest line as collateral."

"No." Hu's lip quivered from his desperation.

"You think it would matter if you got into the trees? I could still hunt you down within seconds. Let her go, or die where you stand." I was done playing this game. My heel dug into the ground, readying to launch. Truthfully, whether he let her go or not, I wouldn't let him live to see morning.

As if reading my thoughts, a delicate hand rested on my shin. I looked down to see Mira reaching for me, holding my gaze. "Don't become the monster you hate," she whispered.

Guilt rose in my chest, acknowledging that I was just as capable of committing horrendous acts as my cursed form. Only this time, I wouldn't have the excuse. The pain in my heart twisted from loss, but I would have made Marvoe pay for what he'd caused.

But Mira didn't want me to cross that line. She wanted me to be able to *live* after this. As easy as it seemed now to cut his life where he stood, I knew she was right. It would haunt me. Taint my soul in a way that was irredeemable.

"Fine," Marvoe spat, releasing and shoving Alaina to the ground.

"Alaina!" Hu called from the pile of rocks he slumped over. She scrambled on the ground to get to him. They embraced as he sobbed into her neck.

Marvoe took off running into the woods, and we watched in silence, comforted only by the cries of grief singing into the night.

I scooped up Mira again, her eyes barely able to remain open, and walked toward Calista. "Are you alright?" I offered my

hand to help her up.

“Jasper,” she barely got out the name before emotions clogged her throat.

We turned to look at the place our friend took his final breath. Not a moment of hesitation or doubt in his eyes when he intercepted that blow. I think he knew what would happen, yet he did it anyway, to save the one he loved.

Tears fell from my eyes. One of the last things I spoke to him was anger and blame, and I could never take that back. He didn’t deserve that, that gargoyle who opened his home to me. The winged creature who radiated joy and love for life. Adjusting Mira so she was cradled against my chest. I wrapped my arm around Calista, pulling her in close as she broke down.

I looked up to see Marvoe fading into the shadows of the trees. He wasn’t worth leaving my friends alone in this grieving state. And Mira didn’t need to see the monster I could become, but for her, I’d wear this mask with pride.

I vowed to the gods, to the forest, to every breath that my lungs would take, that if I saw him again, I would spare no mercy.

He, and any of his magically tainted accomplices would pay. For Mira.

For Jasper.

I had yet to make sense of why this magical band had come to my kingdom, where they had come from, what they were doing here.

Hu picked up a few chunks of rock into his arms and wept. Collectively, we gathered around the stony pile—and mourned.




Mira




Glimpses of sun, followed by the shadows of night, chased endlessly after one another in short bursts of consciousness. This time, though, I had it in me to remain alert for more than a few minutes.

The familiar dark room brought comfort to my daze. I lay in the middle of Dante's bed, my limbs aching with every minor stretch. How long had I been here?

A wooden bowl with a spoon rested on the bedside table, and I recalled moments of warm broth hitting my lips. Encouraging words soothed it down my throat—Deep, masculine words that whispered loving sentiments.

My heart fluttered at the memory, and it felt like twinklers danced in my chest. I wanted to see him. Adjusting so I sat up higher in the bed, my arms trembled. More strength required than I thought possible for a task so small.

Heavy fog coated my recent memories, and they remained out of my grasp. It didn't matter. I smiled and focused on the softness of his bedding. Voices floated into the hall from downstairs. I strained to listen, but couldn't make out much of anything.

So I would remain here until I could hold myself up. Of all the places in the world, this was the spot I would choose to be. The only thing I would change would be having him here with me. His arms around me.

A feeling I'd never experienced expanded in my chest. I rubbed my hand over my heart until I realized what it was.

I missed him. Craved for him to return. But it was more than that, more than anticipation or excitement.

Love.

My heart was full of love for the beast who'd stolen me in the night. The one with a human heart so pure he dedicated his life to helping others. The one who held tarnished marks on his soul, just as I did.

The door opened, and there he stood.

"Mira," he whispered as he rushed to my bedside. "You're awake." He nearly choked on the words.

"Dante." I smiled, sinking further into the pillow. His name was enough to breathe life into my weary spirit. "How long have I been sleeping?"

"Today's the fifth day." He brushed the hair out of my face with his massive paw. I leaned into the soft touch before registering.

"What happened?" I furrowed my brow. Days?

"You were taken. They tried to drain your blood, but we got to you just in time. I feared we hadn't." He stopped his hand, cupping my head as he stared into my eyes. "I'm so sorry that happened." Tears pooled beneath his beautiful brown eyes.

The events flashed in my mind. Struggling in the courtyard, the bumpy ride to wherever they'd taken me. Being strapped to a board.

I shot a glare down to my arm where a bandage wrapped snug around the cut Marvoe had made. A vision of my blood flowing in a ribbon-like wave made me queasy. I squeezed the spot, as if I would prevent it from happening again.

Then I recalled Dante. The way he stormed into the room and shifted before my eyes into something terrifying. He'd told me what he'd been, but it didn't compare to seeing it unfold before my eyes.

A screaming man. Cracking bones. Splattering blood. He'd lost control from seeing me harmed. Bringing my gaze back to him, I brought my hand to his face and rested it there. My chest ached, knowing he must feel pained for becoming what he regretted most. All for me.

"I'm sorry." Tears blurred my vision.

His paw secured my hand to his face. "What are you sorry for, beautiful?"

"For making you turn back into..." I swallowed, not wanting to say it out loud, to remind him.

He shook his head, still holding my hand. "Mira, you saved me. You spoke to me and broke through. You brought me back." I briefly remembered whispering to him through the haze of weakness. His eyes glistened in fascination as he beheld me

awake, stroking my hair. I forced a smile to cover up my internal guilt for deceiving him. I didn't have it in me to tell him that ordeal happened for no good reason because my blessing wasn't what everyone thought. That he'd lost himself for nothing because of me.

More pieces of the night unfolded in my mind and my stomach sank. "Jasper," I whispered, horror striking my features.

"Come," Dante said as he scooped me into his arms.

Even being held almost felt like too much energy expenditure in my state, but I didn't fight it. Instead, I let myself relax into his hold, resting my cheek against his soft fur. He carried me, along with all of my burdens. Burdens that began to feel too heavy to carry. Fears crept under my skin, wondering if when I did tell him the truth, he would think all of his efforts weren't worth it. That I wasn't worth it.

We made it down the stairs, in steps smooth enough that I barely felt them. As we approached the front door, the fire came into view. A familiar, well-loved, bald, gray-faced smile stood up to greet me, along with others in the room.

"Hey! You're awake!" he said, throwing his arms up in the air.

Calista, Hu, and Alaina joined in greeting me.

"And you're alive?!" I questioned, a confused smile slapped across my face. "How?!" Dante smiled as I tossed my gaze between him and everyone else.

"You think I could go down that easy?! C'mon," he said with a teasing rasp. Hu rose on his tiptoes and threw his arms around Jasper's shoulders, placing a kiss on his cheek.

"I'll take the credit, thank you. Although, sometimes that cocky attitude makes me wonder why I would go through the trouble." Alaina approached, crossing her arms and tossing a smirking grin at Jasper.

"My stone form is eternal. If I'd changed back after I'd crumbled, I would have been a pile of bloody bits and *that* would have killed me. Alaina just had to wait to juice up again before she could reassemble me," Jasper said, leaning into Hu's hold.

"Couldn't have told me that at some point, huh?" Hu asked, an edge of anger in his voice.

"I at least should have known! What if I didn't bother trying again?!" Alaina scolded.

"I had faith in you both," Jasper said, plastering on a big, close-lipped smile. But when Calista caught his eye, he briefly worked his mouth to the side in an "oops" fashion.

If he had died, it would have been because of me. Because my friends came for me. The man who held me in his furry arms cared enough to risk losing himself, all so I wouldn't be abandoned. Relieved laughter rushed out of me in gasps, and warm tears trailed down my cheeks. I gazed around the room, seeing faces of the people who had become my family.

"Mira, how about I run you a hot bath, hmm? You've spent too much time in that damned bed, your muscles must be sore," Calista offered, sharing a warm smile. "I brought back a pretty smelling soap from Highcrest on that last run. Thought you'd like it."

"Thank you." I nodded, thinking that actually sounded delightful.

She went off to do that for me, and the rest of us gathered around the coffee table by the fire, conversing as normal. I remained in Dante's hold, trusting him to hold me up when I couldn't do it for myself. My cheeks ended up twitching and becoming stiff from the happiness that plastered my face the entire time.

When my bath was ready, Dante carried me into the bathroom. He went to leave, but I stopped him. "Wait."

He did.

"Stay," I said. Asked. Begged.

He closed the bathroom door, leaving us sequestered in the tiny bathroom. I stripped, letting my clothes fall to the floor. I wobbled on my feet, still weak, but he secured his paw around my hip. The hot water caressed my skin as I sank into the depths. I released a soft moan.

"Gods, you're beautiful," he uttered.

Without shame, without covering myself, I simply let my head fall to the side. We gazed into each other's eyes—when his weren't roaming over my figure. It made me giggle, but also felt empowering.

"Is it selfish of me to ask you to stay?" I asked, wondering if I was keeping him from other things.

He inched closer to the side of the tub, caressing my forehead with his thumb. "Never."

I smiled, but a tear betrayed me. "I don't think I ever want you to leave my side again." I hated the desperation in my voice, but it was true. Now that others in Argora Vale knew about me being here, it wouldn't be long before more attempts to take me came knocking at the door. I didn't want to be caught without Dante when it happened next.

He stroked my hair. "Then I won't, green eyes."

Whatever sadness had infiltrated my mood washed away.

Dante



After Mira had come to and asked me not to leave her side, I hadn't. We ate together, slept in the same bed, read together. I stayed by her side while she bathed. Besides being completely awestruck by her radiant beauty—the softness of her skin, the curve of her breasts, the tiny rolls her belly makes when she sits down—my heart held appreciation greater than I'd ever known.

She was here. Home. I had to choke down anger seeing every patch of red around her wrists, or that slice on her arm. But I focused on her gorgeous smile, the playful way she gathered bubbles and blew them into the air. I could watch her for eternity and never tire.

Afternoons in the library, or by the fire in the sitting room, I just existed in her presence. I didn't need anything more than that.

It'd been a week now since she first awoke, and her strength returned almost fully. I refused to let her push herself though, so anytime she wanted to take a walk, I would carry her in my arms. She'd insisted I stop carrying her around the manor. Reluctantly, I agreed. She'd even worked up the strength to assist Jasper with baking, a skill she'd never learned either.

I couldn't tell if he'd gotten better, or if Mira's intervention saved the day. Regardless, there'd been a couple good loaves of bread, and an edible cake. Calista was already planning another trip to Highcrest for more flour, sugar, and other baking goods. I could tell she was concerned when she mentioned it.

Stealing supplies could only last so long before the chances of getting caught were too high. But I wouldn't discuss it in front of Mira. Not when she was recovering from a terrible ordeal. She didn't need the stress about using her magic to reverse the curse, not until she was well enough.

We sat around the dining room table with Jasper, Cal, Hu, and Alaina. They'd been over a lot more after nearly losing Jasper, and the house had become more cheerful. I could tell Mira enjoyed the company. She relaxed better when all of us were accounted for.

Jasper had begged Calista to make one of her brambleberry pies. I had been surprised by it just as much as Calista. Still, she prepared one as per his request. She cut it into slices and served him a plate, giving him an incredulous look.

"Awesome, Cal. Looks amazing," Jasper said, staring at the pie as if it was his most cherished possession.

"I am...shocked you wanted it. I thought you were sick of brambleberries," Calista said.

"What?! Heck no! I could have died and never would have gotten the opportunity to eat this again!" He scooped a giant forkful into his mouth. He chewed once with a smile. Twice, and the smile faded. By the third, he stilled completely, all light drained from his steely gray eyes.

"Something the matter?" I asked with a shit-eating grin.

Jasper glared at me with daggers in his eyes, but his gaze softened the moment he started to gag.

"Oh gods, Jas. Here, spit it out." Hu held the plate before him.

Jasper extended his tongue, letting the blue, mushy pile plop onto the dish.

"Hey, woah, it's not that bad." Calista looked mildly offended.

Jasper appeared queasy. "Gods, I'm so over brambleberries."

"Wow." Alaina shook her head.

We finished dinner, carrying on in our usual fashion when we gathered together in the parlor. Jabbing insults, petty retaliations, all surrounded by belly-deep laughter. Mira leaned over, placing her hand on my arm to get my attention.

She didn't have to. I was acutely aware of every movement she made, every breath she took.

"I want to go for a walk," she spoke quietly, only for me to hear.

I gave her a look. "It's dark out?"

She smiled, and it was as if the sun had risen again. "I know. I want to see the twinklers."

I laughed, shaking my head. "Whatever you want, green eyes."

I stood from the chair, moving to pick her up.

"No." She raised her hand, stopping me. "I want to walk on my own. I'm ready."

My jaw twitched from clenching my teeth. I knew it wasn't practical to carry her around for the rest of her life, though I kind of enjoyed the idea. Huffing out a resigned sigh, I asked, "You're sure?"

She beamed, nodding at me. "I'll go grab my cloak and boots!" She pranced out of the room, and my heart leapt at the sight of her happiness.

The first time I laid eyes on her, she'd jumped in the snow. But not like this. This was full of life. I loved watching the light return to her spirit. After a life of hardship, she deserved that and more.

She came back, fully dressed for the dropping temperature. "Shall we?" Her tiny elbow extended, pretending to be the gentlemen for me to grab onto.

A playful snarl crinkled my lips, and I rushed her, smacking her behind to nudge her out the door. "Get out there."

She giggled in delighted surprise, and my chest warmed.

We stepped out into the night. The clear sky allowed the brightness of the moon and stars to stand out against the dark skyline, casting a peaceful glow over the white ground.

I let her lead the way, and she pinpointed a swarm of twinklers in the trees. We approached without haste, and she inhaled softly in amazement.

"Wow."

Twinklers were so common here. With all my nighttime traveling, I never even thought twice about them. But Mira watched every wistful movement, reaching out slowly to touch the playful orbs of light. For a moment, I saw them for the first time, through her eyes. They really were quite a beautiful sight, but nothing compared to the joy on her face as the lights danced in her eyes.

The truth became as clear as the cloudless night sky. I loved her. She meant everything to me. Because of her, my life felt renewed, restored. Balanced. It had purpose.

I'd been living so many years, fighting to make it mean something, carefully assessing every action, trying to be deliberate in all my dealings.

Then she came, and everything became easy, effortless. Clear. All of my thoughts and actions boiled down to her. Her needs, her wants. She pulled the strings, able to control this beast—and I was her willing puppet, grateful for any connection she would give me.

I went to speak, to say it out loud, but the words were seized by an uncovered guilt. I had brought her here for my own selfish intentions, and because of that, she'd gotten hurt. How could I make this right?

Watching this beautiful woman, who'd endured so much, finally come into herself. Smile. Laugh. All from being treated like a basic human, tore my soul into pieces. I'd truly given her so little, and not the one thing I knew she desperately longed for all her life.

Freedom.

"Can I say something, and not have you ask me why?" she asked, breaking the silence and catching me off guard by such a question.

"Of course."

She held a look of contemplation, sinking her teeth into her lower lip as she often did when she was thinking deeply, or nervous.

"You have so much more capability than you give yourself credit for." She turned, fixing her gaze on me. "I want you to know that even without me, I know you could find a way to provide for this kingdom. You single-handedly provided for a dozen families for weeks from one afternoon. *You* are the solution."

I wanted to ask what she meant, what brought this on. But she'd asked me not to. "I barely made a dent," I admitted, staring at the wintery ground, not willing to accept her praise like I was a hero when I'd been the villain plaguing this land for decades.

"How can you say that?"

I snapped my attention to her, unknowing of what to say.

"Each life is precious, and you've given hope and full bellies to many." She chewed on the inside of her cheek. "The wise man sits in a tall tower, spectating over all. He views the workers beneath as fools for they do not understand the complexity of their existence. But the fool is the most wise of all, for he builds the life he wants."

I cocked my head to the side, considering the masterful poetry she'd just bestowed upon me.

"You have the power here, Dante. Not me." There was something unsaid, held back that she didn't want to say.

I stared at every facet of her beautiful face under the pale moonlight. I marveled. Her intellect, her wisdom, her beauty. Even in the shadows, the green hues of her eyes boldly stood out, challenging this darkened land to return to its former glory.

Something new stirred in my chest. Something painful.



When Mira had her monthly bleed last week, we'd used the remainder of our herbal pain relievers. While she was taking a bath this morning, I left to retrieve a small batch from Evenita. Always good to have in stock.

I sat in the witch's cottage while she prepared a couple vials of dried herbs. Sounds from her preparation faded as my mind drowned in a whirlpool of thoughts. Since Mira had spoken to me last night, there'd been an endless stream of questions trudging through my head. Unsettling, but not uneasy. Until I ruminated on why I thought she'd said what she did.

'Without me,' those were her words.

Any version of a life without her didn't exist as a possibility, unless...

Unless that's what *she* wanted.

"A few rumors have been going around," Evenita said, not breaking her concentration from scooping a variety of mixes she possessed.

"Yeah, what rumors?" I asked, non-committally.

"Seems the Prince of Highcrest lost The Coveted."

My breathing stilled.

"Reports of a strange red-headed woman have been circulating here, as well. Coincidence sounds like the word. Unless it isn't." She looked at me.

My heart beat faster, but I remained silent.

Evenita sighed, returning to her tinctures. "I've been making stops in a few different villages. Quite a few recently abandoned homes."

Good. Less population meant fewer people hearing about Mira.

"People are becoming desperate, Dante. Thriving dark magic, dwindling resources." She looked at me, only this time, sorrow filled her amethyst eyes. "Magic that can grant a heart's desire sounds like pretty good protection."

Torture wouldn't even get me to confess her whereabouts. Evenita wasn't a threat, but I would protect Mira with my life. Confirmation of her presence was the last thing that needed to be uttered in this kingdom.

She put the stoppers in the vials and walked to me. "All I'm saying, my boy, is if people have learned who she associates with..." She grabbed my paw and placed the tonic teas in my palm, then closed my claws around it. "They'll have a direct line to her."



I didn't remember the race back to the manor. Mira was still in the bath when I returned. She loved using the soaps Calista had brought, and it only made my heart split in half.

Jasper and Calista sat in the parlor. Jasper tossed a wooden ball in the air, over and over, while Calista whittled a new piece for their game.

"I've thought of a way to help with the food supply," I said, huffing to catch my breath.

Jasper turned his focus to me while the ball peaked mid-air, and it fell, smacking his face. "Ow!" He winced, rubbing his cheek. "How?"

Calista stalled her knife against the grain, staring at me.

"I've thought of a way to help the kingdom that doesn't involve keeping her here."

"Keeping her here?" Calista straightened, leaning toward me. "You're going to send her away? What, you want her to leave? She can't." Her eyes pleaded with Jasper to back her up.

"Yeah King, what's going on? We like Mira. This is her home, too."

"We stole her to bring her here. I fucking *stole* her. It wasn't her choice. She's spent her whole life being used, and I don't want to do that to her anymore." Before they could hurtle more questions at me, I left to go upstairs.

All I could picture was her smiling, laughing face. Her wild curls when she dried her hair in front of the fire. Those roaring eyes that symbolized life. I realized I had forgotten to give Mira the gift I knew she'd love. As my steps brought me closer to my room, my thoughts continued.

Mira deserves the world. She is the world to me. How could I ever show her that if I kept my truth from her? If I wanted her to stay for my own selfish reasons?

She deserves the choice. Even if my world will fucking shatter if she leaves. I'll sacrifice my heart to give her that. I'll sacrifice the one shot I have at using her magic to break my curse.

I'll stay trapped in this form, accept my fate, the consequences of my actions, and I'll never have another regret if I can give her the life she wants. Anything for her. Anything.

Purple light erupted from my chest in a blazing explosion as I gripped my bedroom door handle. A sweeping wind ran along my fur, blowing it in all directions. I tried locating the source, but the light grew brighter to the point of blinding. Electricity surged in my veins, and I gripped the door handle for leverage against the raging current.

My heartbeat echoed in my ears as the light dimmed before disappearing completely. I scanned the space for the source, but found myself alone in the quiet hallway. When my eyes fell upon my hand on the door handle, I froze.

My hand gripped the handle.

Bare skin. No fur.

Hand. Not paw.

I took in the sight of my human skin as I ran my gaze up my arm. I brought both of my hands in front of me, turning them forward and backward, studying the foreign limbs.

I swallowed, nearly choking on my disbelief. Barging into my room, I stood in front of the wide mirror topped dresser. A man stared back at me, no trace of a beast.

“How is this happening,” I uttered in complete disbelief. Instead of doing something rational, I slapped my hand across my face as hard as I could. The sting pricked my skin, and I drew my attention back to the mirror.

Still human. Now just with a red handprint across my cheek. My soft brown hair fell shoulder length, slightly wavy and parted in the middle. Golden highlights I hadn’t seen for decades framed my face.

My medium-brown bushy eyebrows topped my dark eyes and long, dark lashes. Chiseled cheeks extended into plush lips, just as I had remembered, except my face adorned a few new scars.

My skin still had the soft, warm olive hue to it, despite not seeing direct sun for ages. I stared into the face of a man I thought I’d never see again, and a rush of air fled from my lungs. A mix of exuberant joy battled with a profound hatred for the face that stared back.

I didn’t know this man anymore. He’d lived a selfish life, caused pain to others, and I didn’t know how I could live with myself in this form again.

Maybe part of me feared I would become him again.

I stood clothed in the same garments I’d been wearing the night I shifted. Emotions swarmed in my mind like bees returning to their hive. I could still smell the stale ale that clung to the fabric.

I tore at the clothes, ripping them from my body, desperate to remove the reminder of the prison I’d been locked in. The temperature in the room assaulted my bare skin in a way I hadn’t felt in decades, and shivers pebbled my arms. Quickly, I rummaged through the drawers, donning leftover garments from the family who lived here prior.

I raced back down the hall, thundering down the stairs. I planted myself in front of the opening to the sitting room, and Calista and Jasper both rose to their feet.

“Who the hell are you!?” Jasper tensed, preparing to take on a fight. Calista chucked her carving on the ground, fisting the knife.

Words failed me. I couldn’t even attempt to explain. Instead, I shrugged and huffed a laugh of pure shock. They exchanged passing glances between them. I gestured to my body, still unable to form words as my mouth remained dropped open.

“Listen, we don’t want—” Jasper stopped, dropping his brow over his eyes.

The confusion there told me he sensed something. I shook my head, bursts of air filled laughter escaping me.

The tension from his shoulders dropped. “King?”

Calista flashed her gaze between us both. “What the fuck... How?” she questioned, wary of the accusation.

“I... don’t... know.” I truly didn’t.

Jasper joined in on the demented laughter and dragged his palms over his bare head.

“Wait... What!?” Calista shook her head, but she joined in on the shock, a smile forming and fading repeatedly on her doubting face. “Quick, what’s the name of your witch friend in town?” She raised the carving knife, aiming it in my direction.

“Evenita,” I stated.

“Quick! What’s Calista’s secret recipe for eggs!” Jasper crossed his arms over his puffed up chest, joining the interrogation.

“Basil,” she and I replied in exhausted unison.

Jasper squinted his eyes, darting them between us. “Hm. Still not telling the truth.”

Calista rolled her eyes. “What do you deliver to the ogres?” She continued her line of questioning, shaking the knife at me.

“Blood from whatever I hunt.”

“What did you think of my father on the night we met?” she pressed, trying to catch me in the snare of a lie.

“I didn’t meet him. Though, I think he’s a prick,” I answered genuinely.

Calista’s arms sagged, dropping to her side. She raced up to me, throwing her arms around me. Jasper followed suit, and we stood in the hallway, embracing as if truly meeting for the first time after years of friendship.

They finally pulled back, and I turned my head to stare longingly down the hall. The bathroom door was open, meaning Mira had returned to that cage of a room. A mix of apprehension and fear turned my feet into cement.

“Go,” Jasper said. When I met his eyes, he had a devilish grin on his face. “She’d love to meet you.” He slapped my shoulder. He stood a couple inches taller than me now, which I didn’t love.

“Calista, why don’t we go check on the chickens, huh?” He placed his arm around her shoulders and guided her away. She had a hard time tearing her gaze from me, but finally, they rounded the corner.

“Ah yes, back to the source of my trauma. Good idea, Jas,” Calista said sarcastically.

I took a deep breath, clenching my fists at my sides, and faced the hallway.

Mira



Dante had left to run an errand, so after my bath I returned to my tiny room. Huddled in my bed, I hung out in here so the heat from the fire would quickly dry my hair. To pass the time, I read.

I flipped through the pages mindlessly, skimming over the now familiar poems.

Conversation down the hall picked up, but my gaze snagged on Dante's favorite poem. My lips curved as I read it, taking in each line with heightened appreciation. It felt like an open window to his soul, and I got to peer inside. A heart that longed to love.

I sensed someone at my door a moment before I looked up to see a strange man standing in the doorway. I slammed the book shut, tossing it on the floor and frantically stood, backing against the wall. Panic struck my warmed up muscles, making them freeze in a different way. Fear constricted my lungs. This couldn't be happening again.

I gathered enough composure, readying to scream—when he spoke.

"Hey, green eyes." The timber of the voice uttering those familiar words made the skin along my neck pebble.

My brain felt zapped, and I did a double take. He held a coaxing smile, and for a moment I rode its inviting current, but snapped myself out of it.

"Who are you?" I held up my hand, trying to keep him at bay while my mind and heart played tug-o-war with an absurd idea.

"An ocean divides us, but my heart knows not the distance. I see you in the morning sun. You call new light to the darkest of nights."

My heart stalled. *This* couldn't be real. Had I fallen asleep while reading that poem? This must have been a dream.

"Dante?" I couldn't contain the question slipping past my lips.

He smiled, accentuating a scar running along the dimple line on his right cheek. I'd touched that same scar, ran my finger over it when it was framed by fur. Peeling myself from the wall, I took light steps toward the gorgeous man standing in front of me, his brown eyes sparkling by firelight.

He stood a foot taller than me by the time I made it close enough, and I craned my neck to peer up at him. His stare washed over me like the comfort of a hot bath, and I wanted to sink into its depths. I blinked repeatedly, tracing every inch of his face. I reached out, allowing my fingers to gently graze his cheek. The man delicately placed his hand on my hip, and I didn't shy away from his touch.

I couldn't stop myself from feeling that scar beneath my finger, searching for confirmation for something that made my heart flutter wildly. I studied his warm, golden tan skin. He brought his hand up to cover mine, and my heart pounded against my ribs at the touch.

Our gazes locked. Connected. I caught the familiar glimpse of something I'd recognized behind wolf-like eyes.

"Dante." This time it wasn't a question.

He squeezed my hand and smiled. It rivaled the beauty of a sunset. I couldn't speak, could barely think. This man who held my heart stood before me in a form so perfect my mind spun. Tears blurred my vision, but held not an ounce of sadness. One fell, and he used his thumb to wipe it away.

His brown eyes turned glassy before he dragged his thumb down, running the pad over my bottom lip. When he lifted his gaze to meet mine again, the silence was deafening.

The air shifted between us, something demanding calling from the depths of my belly at the look in his eyes. He brought his other hand to my lower back, and the heat rivaled that of the raging fire. As if I had no strength, I melted into him. Powerful muscles caught my fall.

He was stunning to gaze upon, and feeling his hands on my body created a pulsing beat between my thighs. Each passing second strained the tension in the room, until I finally broke.

"Kiss me," I demanded, rushing out the words as if waiting any longer would kill me.

He obeyed.

His lips came crashing into mine, and I clutched my hands around the back of his neck, refusing to let him pull away. His hands were possessive as they roamed, like he needed me more than his next breath. It was the same way I needed him.

The sound of our ragged breaths only fueled my building desire. He forced me back, and I stumbled, but the grip of his fingers digging into my hips kept me upright. Tripping over the bed, I fell, but didn't release him. Gravity was no longer my anchor—he was. As long as I held him tight, nothing else mattered.

He prowled over me until our bodies aligned, and I lay beneath his simmering strength. The ache in my core grew into something uncontrollable. Our tongues greeted each other, desperate to explore every inch. My fingers tangled in his flowing hair, the luxurious softness as familiar as his fur.

I'd never experienced anything like this, but it appeared that my body knew what it wanted. What it needed from him. He seemed equally as eager to give it. One of his hands pinned my hip while the other came up to cup my jaw.

Breaking our kiss was almost painful, until he spoke.

“Mira, I love you.”

Staring into his beautiful brown eyes, I saw the truth. I believed him, even down in the darkest depths of my soul, the parts where hope had withered and shriveled into something non-existent, believing happiness and love were out of my reach. His words infused every part of my being. Before I could even blink, the truth came pouring out of me as torrentially as a waterfall, wild and certain. “I love you, too.”

A flicker of something primal raged in his features, sparked by my words. He groaned, his hold on me growing more firm, as if he'd been holding back before. Everything else ceased to exist. Our pasts. Time itself. Nothing remained but the present moment where our love could take shape into the physical. When he dove, pressing another burning kiss to my wanting lips, I felt it—the piece of my soul that now bared his brand.

My fingers trailed down his back, finding the end of his shirt and crumpling the fabric in my fists as I pulled it off him. In one smooth motion, he let it come off. He was exquisite, and he was mine. Instead of aiming for my lips, he tucked himself into the crook of my neck. My body melted in ways I didn't know existed as he devoured the sensitive skin. My eyes rolled back at the feeling. Between us, his hard length pressed into me and I gasped, needing it. Craving him.

“Dante,” I whispered through greedy, searching hands that explored the new expanse of skin. A surge of heat created a needy slickness between my thighs. I pried my legs further apart, my body pleading for his.

“Gods, Mira. I need you.” He wasted no time tugging off my dress, leaving me completely exposed. Hesitating, he gazed down, drinking in the sight of me beneath him.

My skin heated.

“You're fucking perfect.” With rough hands that caressed me in a delicate manner, he ran them along my hips until they curved around my breasts. My nipples tightened in response, tense and aching for more.

Like a man unleashed, his mouth was on me in seconds. His tongue rolled over the sensitive peaks, and I moaned. I arched beneath him, giving him more access to parts of me that had never been tended to.

Watching him devour me felt like being worshiped. He could have all of me, any part he wanted. He hummed against me, and I whimpered. The sound of his pleasure lit a fire of desire, one that I had no choice but to succumb to.

“I love you so deeply Mira, it's agony.” He stared at me, jaw dropping, breathing ragged.

We both stood at the precipice of a love we never thought we'd have, two people wounded by the life they'd been given. My hands skimmed along his back, and I could feel the raised marks of countless scars marring his beautiful skin. I felt grief for his pain. Gratitude for his strength. Admiration for his caring heart, and awe at how he'd used all of it to tend to me.

“You are the entire world,” I echoed back to him.

“Fuck,” he hissed, diving down into the crook of my neck and biting the tender flesh.

I cried out, wrapping my arms around his neck and holding him close. His hips writhed against mine. I resented the fabric restraining us so much I wanted to chuck his clothes into the fire.

He apparently shared the same thoughts, because the next second, he ripped his pants down and tossed them behind him. Sitting upright on his knees before me, the most talented artists in the world could have painted this exact moment and never captured all of his beauty.

The sight of him drove me wild. His muscled arms, his broad chest. The solid length between his thighs.

I didn't know what I wanted, but I knew I wanted him.

“Can I taste you?” His question confused me, but I nodded.

Slowly, he lowered himself between my legs. I blinked a few times, my chest straining with anticipation. His lips pressed against my inner thigh near my knee, and he tongued the skin as he made his way up with every kiss. My core throbbed at the sight.

He moved closer to that part of me that begged for him, disappearing beneath the mess of auburn curls. Those earthy brown eyes connected with me as his tongue delicately pressed against my aching center. I gasped, and he wrapped his arms around my thighs and held them firmly in place. He licked with relentless precision and my vision tilted.

I fisted the sheets, needing to secure myself to something. When his tongue pushed inside of me, I nearly screamed. This was what I needed. For him to be *there*. I found myself sinking into him further. He pushed in and pulled back in the most delicious, repetitive motions.

“Fuck, Mira. You’re soaking wet.” He licked and sucked and dipped inside, and I writhed under every touch. Pressure expanded within and I moaned, gripping onto the pillow. When I peered down, I saw his mouth and fingers working in tandem. My body rocked and swayed to match his rhythm, like I couldn’t get enough.

He pulled away, his chest heaving. Like a predator on the prowl, he slowly stalked over me, pressing whisper soft kisses up my abdomen. I was aching, burning, squirming beneath his languid assault, desperate for him to be inside me again.

The sensual grin that emerged on his lips as he watched my desperation sent shivers down my body. Seeing happiness on his face was like storm clouds parting, and being the reason for it could have stopped my heart.

“Is this what you want, Mira?” He lowered, taking my nipple into his mouth, sucking, while prodding at my entrance. His stiff length was gentle and softer than I imagined as it kissed my core, nudging briefly before relaxing. My world blurred.

“More,” I begged, almost unable to speak through the lust coursing through me.

He brought his lips sinfully close to mine without letting them touch. “All I am is yours, Mira. You’ve had my heart from the moment I saw you. Whatever you want, however you’ll have me, I will give you everything, and I will never take from you.” His nose brushed over mine and his lips pressed into me, delicate and soft.

“I want you,” I whispered, hands cupping his jaw, fingers denting his cheeks. I stared at him and poured my heartfelt truth into that look. “All of you. Fully. Like I’ve never had anyone before. My heart is yours.”

“Are you sure?” His thumb stroked my jaw in a tender caress, his golden brown hair cascading around his perfect cheekbones as he hovered above me.

My heart exploded. His love for me poured out in every action, every word, every ounce of patience. Never had someone put my needs above theirs like he did, never gave me choices, let me set the pace. He’d always done this. With warming up at Evenita’s cottage, letting me wander the garden and woods, with not pressuring me about my blessing after I said I’d help. Warm tears pricked the backs of my eyes as I beheld the one person to give me everything I ever wanted.

“Yes, I love you so much. I’ve never wanted anything more.” My breath hitched, and I lost the battle. Tears rolled down my cheeks.

He cupped my face. “If you’re not ready, I have a lifetime to wait for you, my love.”

If he said anything else more tender and caring, I’d become a sobbing mess. I silenced him with my kiss. I clawed at his hips, driving him forward. His already slick tip prodded at my equally wet entrance, and I moaned with anticipation.

“Mira.” He shuddered, his muscles shaking as if this was too much for him.

“Dante.” His name was a heavenly chorus.

I expanded around him as he inched inside. More, I needed more. “Dante!” I cried again. A song. A plea.

“You feel so fucking *perfect*,” he said through gritted teeth.

“Deeper. I need you *deeper*.”

He fed the rest of himself into me, and I cried out with satisfaction.

“Are you alright?” He set his forehead against mine.

“Oh gods, yes.” Here is where our souls merged, joining beyond words, beyond bodies. Permanently etching our love into one another.

He groaned as he settled in place. “I fucking love you, Mira.” He ravished me. My lips, my neck, my chest. “I am yours. Completely yours.”

The rhythm he began set off a symphony in my heart. Gently, he swayed like a boat rocking on the ocean, never withdrawing, but expertly gliding to press against every part of me internally.

Our breaths mingled as our bodies worked together in perfect tandem.

“I’m going to take care of you, Mira. Always.” His hand slid between us, fingers masterfully working my throbbing center.

I lost grip on reality. Only his body and my pleasure existed. If I was loud or quiet, still or moving, I had no perception. Swept into the rising tide, I had no choice but to follow its pull. Pressure built, a lightness that tickled beneath my skin.

“Let go for me,” he cooed in my ear.

A lifetime of defenses crumbled to dust as I gave myself over to him completely. I’d let him hold me in his hands, my body, my heart. Not one part of me feared he would let me fall. With him, I was safe.

So I stepped off the edge, plummeting into a pit of ecstasy. Pleasure filled sounds worked their way out of my throat and my fingers clung to him for stability as I tumbled. Pulsing waves crashed over me, wrapping around him inside me.

His voice shuddered right along with me. My heart expanded to the full size of my chest, knowing we careened off the edge together. I had trouble focusing as I swam through the haze of bliss.

Dante peered down at me, tears glistening as he worked to catch his breath. I managed a smile as I stared directly into his soul, knowing he saw mine.

“You are worth every second it took to get to you.” He pressed his forehead against mine, and all I could do was wrap my

arms around him, holding him close.

We lay in each other's arms, fitting perfectly together as we came down from that all-consuming high. He stroked my hair, the hair that I didn't have to hide. No part of me had to remain hidden, at least not from him. I could be me, bare my all, and feel more protected than any of the walls I'd painstakingly built for myself.

"This is what true happiness feels like," I said softly, running my fingers over his heated skin.

Dante

Regardless of how long I'd waited to touch another woman, no experience prior even remotely compared to that. She waved the white flag on the battleground of my heart, calling everything troubled in me to cease. She freed me, gave me relief from the relentless agony I'd carried as a burden for ages. And fuck, did she feel incredible around my cock.

We lay, a tangled mess of limbs in the aftermath of ecstasy. She wasn't as tiny in my grasp now that I'd become a man again, but it didn't feel any less like a perfect fit.

I pressed a kiss to the crown of her head, and she hummed.

"I can't believe this is real," I said.

"It feels like a dream," she replied, her delicate fingers tracing indistinct swirls over my chest.

"You are a dream, Mira," my tone turned somber.

She lifted to look at me and I drowned in her emerald depths.

"I've never cared about anyone the way I care about you. It's as if—" I pondered for a moment. "You are the air that fills my lungs. The light that chases away my dark. Your sad heart song calls to mine like a melody." Intertwining our fingers, I raised our hands together. "You are my entire reason for being, and I pledge myself to you, now and always, to be your protector."

"You already have been." She stroked some hair away from my face with the lightest touch of her fingertips, her gaze perusing every one of my features. "I've never had anybody I've trusted my life with until you. I don't just mean physically." She shook her head, tense lines creasing her forehead. "No one else knows of my pains. My heartache. My longing. It's been so hard to carry alone."

I kissed those harsh lines, letting her know I would always be there to counter her hurt. "You can share all of it with me, green eyes." Resting my head against hers, I asked, "Are you hungry?"

I couldn't recall a time when I'd ever asked a woman in my bed if they needed anything after sex. All of my care for them left the moment my seed did. But Mira, she was the embodiment of my heart given human form.

"Starving." She let a devilish grin curve her lips to one side. I laughed, and drove a hard kiss into her before helping her up.

I plucked her dress from the floor. Before I realized, I found myself actually dressing her, though I still stood fully naked before her.

Her wandering eyes didn't go unnoticed. I looked down, taking note of the gashes and scars along my abdomen and sides. A beast running through the forest didn't let branches and twigs get in its way. I just hadn't realized how many times they must have broken the skin.

One particular mark bubbled with pinkish scar tissue more than the others. A memory filled with anguish. Another punishment for the mistakes I'd made.

Despair filled my gut with a dark tumultuous sea, calling me to drown, but a warm palm rested on my cheek. I looked up to see the color of a calm, peaceful, flourishing forest.

My shoulders sagged, and I tilted into her hold.

"You're here now. With me. You don't have to stay there, wherever you went in your mind just now."

A new spark illuminated my darkest depths, and I brought myself back to the present moment. I kissed the center of her palm. "You're perfect."

She slid her arms around me until she pulled me close. I nuzzled into her neck, arms wrapped around her waist as I inhaled her scent.

After I dressed, we walked through the house, hand in hand. Approaching the kitchen, I heard Jasper and Calista muttering, trying to keep their voices down. When they saw me peer in, Jasper snapped to attention from their huddled gossiping position at the table.

“Hey! King! Man of the hour.” He stood up.

“I still can’t believe this.” Calista’s hands tugged the skin on her face, making her eyes and lips strain back. “What were you doing when this happened?!”

Guiding Mira, I pulled out her seat at the table. Then I went to grab mine, and out of habit sat down, essentially falling on the flat of my back since the damn stool sat so low to the ground.

Jasper and Calista exploded with laughter. Mira got out of her seat and extended her hand to me. I took it, redness marking my cheeks before I stood up.

“Well, that won’t work anymore,” I said, kicking the stool back toward the wall.

“It’ll take some getting used to,” Mira whispered next to me, stroking her hand along my arm. “It’ll be fine.” She smiled, and the look of that alone settled me.

Calista got up and pulled one of the guest stools, skidding it across the floor to me.

“Thanks.” I tipped my chin up at her.

“Yeah, what happened up there?” Jasper prodded, continuing the conversation.

“I don’t know. I went upstairs to get something for Mira, and before I reached the door, a light started shining. A dizzying wind swarmed around me, and I couldn’t figure out where it was coming from, and then it all just...stopped. Quieted. When I looked down, I saw these.” I brought up my hands, inspecting them the same way I had then.

“Do curses ever just...run out?” Jasper asked Calista.

She pushed out her bottom lip. “Not that I’m aware. There’s usually a reason the curse was given, and when that root cause is resolved, the curse can be broken. You must have done something, broke it somehow.”

My eyebrows pinched together as I retraced my thoughts. “I was going to tell you that I didn’t want to keep you here anymore.” I looked at Mira, whose face filled with shock. “No, not like that.” I placed my hands around one of hers. “I meant, I was considering how you’ve always been captive, how you desire freedom, and I wanted to tell you that you could be free.”

Her confusion softened, the sparkle in her green eyes returning.

I looked at my friends. “Even if it meant I’d never return to this.” I flexed my fingers on the tabletop.

Calista said, “You were cursed for being a selfish ass. I guess this was the first truly selfless thing you’ve tried to do since.”

Of all the people in my life, Calista knew the most detail about how my curse came to be. She’d watched me try to figure out a life where I could make up for my past, but it was always for a selfish reason. To ease my own guilt.

Mira’s hand slipped from my grasp.

“I thought you brought me here to stop the dark magic. To save the kingdom,” she spoke into her lap, not meeting my gaze.

Something was wrong. “I did. Mira, I did.” I reached for her hand, but she pulled away.

The room fell silent, filling with uncomfortable tension. When Mira finally lifted her gaze to mine, tears brimmed her eyes, but I didn’t find sadness in them. I found anger.

“But that wasn’t the only reason, was it?”

A lifetime of selfish nature tainted everything, and I found myself caught in the snare of guilt yet again. My throat bobbed under the strain.

“You made me believe you weren’t like the others. That you could justify stealing a woman for magic if it meant saving an entire kingdom. But you’re just like everyone else. You kept me for your own selfish desires. You played me. I should have seen it, should have known.” She stood, sending her chair scraping against the floor.

“You tricked me!” she shouted, knuckles white by her sides. “I thought you had a pure heart! That you’d lived a life of regret, but had dedicated the rest of your time to making things right, to caring for others.”

My heart strained, like it was being squeezed in her tiny palms of fury.

“This whole time you wanted to use me for your own gain.”

She may as well have slapped me across the face, the sting of her statement felt the same. I hated that she saw the truth, that it was true.

I rose from my stool. “Mira.” I reached for her, but she stepped back.

“I asked why you brought me here.” Her shouts turned into a near whisper. “You weren’t honest with me. I decided to help you in any way I could, but you would always be waiting for my magic.” She chewed on her trembling lip. “But the rumors aren’t true. I can’t grant desires. What would have happened if I stayed here and you remained a beast?” she asked, as if the answer wasn’t obvious.

I rushed up to her, holding her face in my hands. “Mira, I would have lived the rest of my life as a beast, and loved you all the same.” My breathing turned ragged, wanting to make her believe me.

“I thought you *saw me*, but you never truly did, did you? I don’t know if you ever really loved me, Dante. You just fell for the power, like everyone else.” Her last blink released tears down her cheeks and she tugged out of my grip, storming down the hall.

I cast a glare toward my friends at the table, as if seeking some sort of answer for what to do. They seemed obviously uncomfortable.

“Why didn’t you tell us you wanted her to break your curse, too?” Calista asked.

It was a fair question. One I was ashamed to admit. “I thought it meant I never really changed. I guess I haven’t.” A thud rang out into the room as I bashed my fist on the table.

Calista stood up and made her way to me. “Listen King, I didn’t know you before. But I’ve known you after. Not once have I ever felt like you put yourself above others. I know your motivation was probably to appear selfless, which was a selfish act in itself. Damn, that witch was clever with her casting. But you, standing here now, looking like this.” She gestured up and down my human physique.

“That’s the truth. Mira’s upset. You lied to her. I don’t know what she’s been through, but it seems like it’s been hard. Deep down, she knows you’re not like them. She has to. But she’s hurt, and she’s going to have to grapple with her emotions until she sees the truth, as plain as this human man standing in front of her.” She rested her hand on my arm, offering comfort with her words.

“What if she doesn’t?” I choked on the thought, trying to swallow the bubbling emotions.

Calista sighed, dropping her hand. “Then you’ve already made the decision to let her go.”

It wouldn’t take wolf ears to hear the sound of my heart actually breaking.



Mira



My heart galloped faster than a herd of wild horses. I'd thought I was done feeling used.

The fact that I willingly gave myself to him, convincing myself the gods had blessed me with a chance to have actual love, was what sat in my stomach like rotting stew.

I think a small part of me refused to actually believe I'd been deceived. But the part of me that spent a life building barriers and protections screamed at me that I had. I shouldn't have let him get close, shouldn't have strayed from what would protect me.

Now look at myself. I've been made a fool, left exposed, no armor left to guard my heart. This is what all those self-imposed rules saved me from—getting close to people. The thought that I could ever have any sort of happiness in this life knowing the gift I've been cursed with was naïve. I've been so foolish.

Tears poured down my cheeks, and I didn't feel in control of my body. I picked up an antique decorative box from the desk in the hallway and hurled it against a wall. The broken pieces hit the floor, but I wasn't done. Next in my tunnel vision of anger was the candelabra. I tossed it down the hall as far as it could go. It didn't break, but I hadn't expected it to.

Red movement caught my eye. I turned, peering at the reflection in the rust spotted mirror hanging on the wall.

All I could see was a girl duped into using her real magic. Tricked, made to think there was good in the world. Every lesson she'd ever learned was so easily forgotten. Fooled by a captor, the most cunning of all, because not only did she want to help, she wanted love. So desperately she wanted to be loved that she became the most vulnerable she ever had.

And what did it leave her?

Tear-stained cheeks, a hollow chest, and coursing rage from the wake of betrayal.

I lifted the mirror from its hook and sent it crashing onto the ground with a therapeutic scream. It shattered.

Peering down at the settling shards, my reflection remained, though fragmented. It mimicked the way my soul felt. Broken.

A new kind of desperation blurred my eyes. The green-eyed girl who stared up at me needed to be put back together. I couldn't leave her like this. She'd been through too much.

I bent down, grasping the jagged pieces.

“Ow!” I released the one in my hand after it'd cut the soft flesh on my palm. The sting of it made me clutch it with my other hand.

Running footsteps on the other side of the wall got louder until he rounded the corner. “What happened!?” Dante kneeled beside me.

“NO!” I pushed him back, using the back of my wrist as I kept my wound sealed.

“Mira, you’re hurt,” he said.

“Leave me alone!” I swung at him with my bound hands. He swayed back to dodge the pathetic attempt at a hit.

Calista rounded the corner and rushed to my side. “Let me help you.” She didn’t give me much of a choice, already helping me to my feet, but I didn’t fight her.

“Let me—”

Calista interrupted him, “I’ve got her. You’ll just make it worse.”

She held me in her arms as I stumbled down the hallway, uncontrollable sobs bursting from me. She brought me to my room and set me on the bed.

“I’m going to go run you a bath, Mira, okay?” She crouched down in front of me, forcing me to look at her directly.

My breaths were sporadic, but I nodded, blinking hard when I did, causing more tears to pinch from my eyes.

“You’re just overwhelmed right now. It’ll help settle you. I’ll be right back.” She left quickly, leaving me alone. My eyes shot daggers at the hallway, ready to scream at Dante the second he came into view.

But he didn’t come. I guessed he listened to Calista’s warning. Did that make me more mad? I couldn’t tell which way was

up or down with the flurry of emotions tugging me in every direction.

Decorum be damned, I wailed this time. How could something hurt this much? I'd heard people talk about dying from a broken heart, but I thought it was hyperbole. This felt like it, though, as if death knocked on my door.

I didn't care to fight it either. It hurt too much. If death wanted to take me, I'd let it. It'd provide me relief from this torture, and finally set me free of this damned blessing.

A kingdom still cursed, and now a shattered heart. All of this for nothing, except pain.

Calista came back and led me into the bathroom. She helped me undress, and when I sank into the bubbly water, she gave me space. Multiple times I held my breath, holding myself under the surface to silence the world.

To scream.

Before, I would have been terrified to bring back any memories of what it felt like beneath the ice, but I needed to escape.

Maybe it would have been better if I hadn't held on so long under there. Just let the frigid waters claim me.

Survival brought me above the warm surface, over and over, until I didn't have enough care to dunk again. My head rested on the porcelain, and I remained so incredibly still that the water barely moved.

There was a light knock on the door, and I'd remembered Calista say she'd bring me back a towel. I didn't bother to look up, not even when the door closed behind her.

"I have something for you," Dante's voice was so gentle it didn't even startle me to hear it.

"I don't want it." My lips almost couldn't form the words, my body felt so heavy.

"First, let me treat your cut," he said, and I heard the clink of tincture bottles.

I didn't respond, didn't have the energy to say no. Though that was the answer. He kneeled next to the tub.

"Give me your hand," he asked with a mask of tender affection.

I remained silent.

"Mira, you can be mad at me all you want, but I won't let you get an infection. Either give me your hand, or I'm reaching in and getting it myself." The tenderness vanished, and in its place was something primal.

I didn't care to be grabbed at, so I gingerly lifted my hand from the water, letting the soap wash down my arm as I did.

"Gods, Mira." He judged the gash.

Truthfully, it stung like a wench. The soap only agitated it further, but him pulling on the skin didn't help either. I hissed at the pinching sensation.

"I'm sorry." His gentle affection returned. What a good actor he was.

Once he cleansed it and covered it with salve, he wrapped it in clean cloth. "Don't get this wet."

"So now I have to awkwardly keep my wet arm out of the warm water and let it freeze? Gods, you couldn't even let me enjoy a bath? Do you just want to ruin my entire life?" My anger spilled out.

I didn't know which feeling I preferred: melancholy, or unrestrained anger.

He faced away from the tub, leaning his back against it. His neck rested against the lip, his sigh filling the room. "Mira, I know you're upset. You're wrong, though. Everything I've said to you is the truth."

"Except—" I started to correct him.

"Except for why I brought you here, yes. I didn't tell you *both* reasons. I don't think I was ready to hear it out loud. I knew it was selfish of me. I've spent the past few years trying to kill that part of myself, and if I didn't admit it, it felt less real. I'm sorry.

"This curse broke because I was willing to put you before me. But seeing you so angry, fearing you might actually want to leave, is making my decision painfully regrettable. I don't want you to go. I can't have you go."

"I am nothing without you, Mira. I have nothing without you. You hold my heart in your hands, and there's nothing I can do about it. As much as it fucking tears me up inside to even think it, if I've hurt you so unredeemably that you feel you need to leave, then I won't stop you."

"I won't fucking send you out on your own, but I'll make sure you get to wherever you're going, and I won't bother you again."

Tears welled in my eyes, and my lip trembled. It broke my heart that I might have to do just that—leave.

"But know that for every day for the rest of my life, I will see you in the sunrise and sunset. In the flowers that fight to bloom here. In the twinklers that shine in the night. I will never *not* think of you. You are and will always be my entire world." The words barely made it out of him as his throat clogged with rising emotions.

He rose to his feet and reached into his pants pocket. He took whatever he'd pulled out and set it in the palm of my bandaged hand that hung over the side. He closed my fingers around it. Then, he walked out without another word.

My hand clutched whatever he'd placed in it, despite the tight wrapping of the bandage. The smooth surface underneath my fingertips felt familiar. I noted the size and shape by the feel and weight of it.

I sat up, staring at my closed hand, almost afraid to open it. Slowly, I forced my fingers to uncover the object.

I gasped when I saw the familiar beauty of emerald swirls.

My stone.

Dante

I lay on my bed, staring at the canopy draped above. What became the best day of my life quickly morphed into the worst. If she walked out, I didn't know what I would do. I would take being cursed a thousand times over, with that excruciating transformation and loss of self, than accept Mira would no longer be in my life.

The deep connection I'd read about in poetry for years, the one I didn't think possible for me in this lifetime, had been granted by some miracle. *She* was my miracle.

How could one live a life after losing something like that? There'd be nothing left of me.

Anger spread under my skin at the thought of her life before this. How a lifetime beat her down, teaching her not to trust.

The searing rage poured down my cheeks over the thought that I'd just been added to the list of people to do that to her. I wanted to roar, but these human lungs wouldn't hold a satisfying amount of air.

A small rap at my door took my attention. I didn't know if I could handle hearing any advice from Calista or Jasper right now. Most likely it was Calista, ready to chastise me for not giving Mira space.

I stalked over to the door, opening it, ready to send away whoever stood there.

Until I saw *her*.

She held out her bandaged hand with the stone, a towel lazily wrapped around her dripping body. "Where did you get this?" "You said you lost it in the woods."

"I did. How is it here, in my hand, right now?"

I drew a deep breath. "I knew how much it meant to you, so when I went to deliver to the ogres, I tracked through the forest until I found it. It carries your scent."

"You... You did that for me?"

"Mira, I would do anything for you." It was the truth.

The battle behind her eyes told me she was fighting to believe it. I wouldn't let her doubt it for a moment longer. Clasping my hands around her face, I crashed down into her. She could shove me, kick me, slap me, anything to get me off of her. But I had to prove it, at least to try.

When her arms closed around my neck, my chest burned. I bent down and lifted her up until her legs squeezed my hips. She was intoxicating. Walking us back, I shut the door blindly behind me and moved us to the bed.

I sat down, letting her knees rest on the mattress as she straddled me. Breaking from her lips, I traced kisses along the side of her neck, whispering to her as I did.

"Mira, I'm so sorry. I never want to hurt you. I would die for you. Please, tell me you believe me."

Through her hushed moans, she did. "I believe you."

"Don't you ever walk out that door." The tenor of my voice dropped to something deadly serious. My fingertips sunk into the skin on her back, metaphorically sinking my claws into her. If she had trouble believing my words, I would make her *feel* them.

"You are meant to be here with me. I'm going to prove it, every day." Ripping the towel down and exposing her breasts, I took one into my mouth, nipping and tugging enough that she was forced to arch under my strength.

Between moving from one breast to the other, I ordered, "Tell me you'll never leave." Then I sucked on the pretty pink peak, letting my tongue roll over its point.

Her fingers threaded through my hair, and she angled her hips directly over my hardening length. "I'll never leave," she whimpered.

I tossed her onto the bed, spread her thighs wide, and dove into the thick red curls to kiss her sensitive flesh. She cried out, and her hips bucked. My fingers dimpled her thighs, keeping her open on display.

I lapped and licked, playing with the folds against my tongue. Then I drew the peak of her into my mouth and sucked.

“Dante!” she gasped.

“That’s right, my love. Tell the gods that you’re mine and I’m never letting you go.”

My tongue ran up her slick slit before I slipped a finger inside. Her expressions of pleasure had me hard as a fucking rock. I played with her, teasing, plunging my finger in and out. My finger glistened, and her essence coated my tongue.

Two fingers deep, I began curling motions. Her shivers and gasps fueled me. I savored her. After fearing I may never have her again, I wasn’t going to waste this opportunity.

I kissed and massaged her pretty pink lips with my tongue, learning which motions she liked the most. When I finally peered up, after being blissfully buried in her, and saw her fingers twisting and tugging her perfect peaks, I snapped.

I came up and took over, working one breast with my mouth and the other with my fingers. Her breathing turned ragged, and I couldn’t hold back. After ripping down my pants, I nudged between her thighs, and aligned myself with her warm entrance.

“You drive me fucking wild,” I purred.

“Show me,” she challenged.

The devilish grin on my face spread wide as I marveled at this spunky little spitfire. I pushed inside, not easing as gently as I had the first time. Her fingernails dug into my back in response.

“Use your words,” I crooned.

“Gods, Dante, you feel so good.”

Thrusting until I stopped at the hilt, she tossed her head back onto my pillow, closing her eyes and crying out as her jaw hung wide.

“I want to discover all the sounds and faces you make.” I bit the sensitive skin on her earlobe.

“Yes, yes. Keep going,” she begged, nearly breathless.

“Whatever you want, Mira,” I said as I pulled out and thrust back in. She felt magnificent clenched around me, so wet that I could move with ease. I could fucking live inside her and never want for anything. She embodied my hopes and losses. My triumphs and pains. I fucking loved her.

She scratched at my back, clinging to me as I railed into her over and over again, rolling my hips in such a way that I’d hit that very spot I knew she craved. My name dripped from her lips on repeat. Music of the gods.

Her breathing turned into whimpers as I worked her, and I had to consume them. I covered her mouth with mine, swallowing every cry she elicited down to my core. Her fingers weaved through my hair and she broke our kiss as she moaned with ecstasy. I battled the brink, refusing to spill until she hit the pinnacle.

When waves of pressure gripped my cock, I fell right alongside her.

We fought for breath as I settled overtop her feminine curves.

“You are my everything,” I breathed against the newly flushed hue of her cheek. Her hands caressed my skin, her touch magical. When she’d pushed me away, I’d thought I might die.

But here, in her arms, I could, and I’d be perfectly happy.




Mira




Besides getting food, and the occasional bathroom break, we spent the entire day curled up in his bed. Mostly we cuddled, and for a while he read to me. He still couldn't get over how it felt to hold a book in his human hands again.

Every time he flipped the page, he fixed on the paper's texture between his fingers. Something so small that I never gave any thought to, he studied as if admiring a work of art. I loved watching his newfound appreciation.

For a while, I stared at my stone, noting every line and shade of green as I rotated it in my fingers. I spoke about the memories I had of my mother, even the last one, the hardest to share, the one that haunted my dreams. The day my life changed forever.

"There'd been incidents where a couple people had died from magic attacks. With trust regarding magic already flimsy at best, things became heated.

"My parents enlisted a local witch to bless me with a spell of protection, in case unease grew dangerous. Things went downhill quickly after that.

"So, we moved. My parents tried to keep me sheltered, learning that my blessing acted like a strange magnet whenever people interacted with me. But rumors started and caught like wildfire, quickly spreading to our new town. The man who'd employed my father heard rumor of who I was, what my gift could supposedly do.

"He tracked down my father, and I used that opportunity to sneak outside. That's when I came across the first man to take me. I realized then how dangerous desire is. People will do anything to get their hands on it. He killed my parents, desperate for his mining operation to strike a new cache of ore. Before he learned that my blessing wouldn't work, another man had stolen me away in the night. Thus the never-ending cycle began."

"Gods," he cursed. His arms tensed around me, as if trying to protect me from things that happened in the past.

I settled into his embrace, letting the memories slip past my lips and out of my mind. In his arms, I didn't have to dwell on them. "A blessing meant to protect me became a curse that doomed me. The irony."

"I can see more clearly now why I hurt you, by keeping that secret. I'm so sorry, Mira."

"I can't blame you. You wanted to be free, just like me." I offered a smile of contrition. "Even the castle had become another kind of prison by the time you took me. But here, with you and Calista and Jasper, I felt like more than just my blessing. I felt like a person. That's been the freedom I've craved all along. I just didn't know it."

He showered me with kisses over every inch of my face, and I giggled at the playful aggression. Once he settled, I basked in the relief that came from sharing those parts about myself.

"I wish I could change how we met, but I couldn't imagine my life without you in it. I want you to know that I will be your fiercest protector, in whatever form I possess. You will never fall victim to another's greed ever again." He palmed my face and kissed me deeply, as if sealing his promise.

I drowned out the voices that told me it wouldn't be true. "Your turn," I said, changing the subject.

Dante spoke of his mother and father, his sister, all since passed. He remained frozen in time as the magic bound to him, not aging a day. Evenita, his friend whom I'd yet to meet, and who tended to me during my injury, was the one who freed him from the cage of the curse.

"I remember smelling her through the woods. She'd set up a tiny camp, and roasted a rabbit over the spit. The full moon fueled my purpose, to find, and kill, and eat. That clever witch had set up an invisible thread around her camp, and when I barreled through it, she had fair warning. Cans attached to it rattled and rang into the night.

"I'd set my sights on her. Nothing could break me from the trance until I'd accomplished my mission. Bloodthirsty rage is blinding. I lost touch with reality, like stepping onto another plane where all that exists is the hunger and the need to satisfy it."

My head rested on his bare chest, and he stroked my hair while recanting the story.

"She tripped over a sitting log, and I bound up to her, casting my colossal frame over her, ready to pounce. I wonder to this

day why she didn't just snap my neck. She could have, her spell work is strong. Instead, she held up her hand and whispered a few ancient words.

"I'd thought lightning struck me, with how violent and sharp the surge of her magic hit. However, once it stopped, I could see again. See the world through my human eyes. If not for her, I'd still be roaming the lands, tearing up anything with a pulse that I came across. Destroying lives, families..."

The hurt in his tone felt as tangible as his skin under my fingers. "I'm sorry that happened to you. It's not your fault." I pushed off him so I could look directly into his eyes.

"Yes it is," he whispered with a broken smile. "If I hadn't been such a bastard, careless with other people's hearts, I never would have become...*that*."

"Only the witch who casts a curse can break it if it doesn't get fulfilled Calista said. Did you ever try to track her down? The witch who cast it?" I asked.

"I did, after Evenita broke my fog. She admitted her punishment was harsh, especially after knowing the devastation it had wrought for decades. Yet, she still refused to lift it. There was no hint of malice in her voice as she did, though. She said I still had a chance to break it myself, and the reward would then be far greater for me."

I twisted my lips, conflicted over this witch denying Dante his freedom, but knew I wouldn't have met him otherwise. He'd managed to find the strength to break his curse, so I asked the question, "Was she right?"

His thumb stroked my cheek, and he peered into my eyes, the answer shining brightly in his own. "Absolutely." He brushed his nose back and forth across mine. A smile danced upon my lips, a radiant expression of the joy that bubbled up from the depths of my being. I knew with unwavering certainty that I had found my home in his embrace.

"Did you ever try going back to see your family?"

He nestled back into the pillow, pulling me down to rest on him again. "I did. Thirty years had passed by then. Of course, having a beast knock on your door in the dead of night doesn't invite a warm welcome. I can still hear my mother's screams, the look of pure terror on her face, just like all the rest..."

"I'd tried reasoning with them, but the rumors of what I'd done scared them too much to accept it. The last words my father said to me were that his son died a long time ago, and they'd never love a monster. Then my mother stabbed me with the kitchen knife."

He traced his fingers over the thickest scar on his abdomen.

"Gods, I'm sorry." I placed a kiss on the hardened tissue. *That is a reminder that sometimes there is no redemption*, he had said.

"No, I knew what I'd done. What I'd become. I just didn't know how to live in the aftermath of it all. I couldn't be a human, though in my mind I felt like I was, not living in a body that would always serve as a reminder of the atrocities I'd committed. For years, I wandered. Hid myself from people. But one night, I came across a girl freezing in the woods."

"Calista," I said.

He hummed in agreement. "I decided then and there that I could never have my old life back, but I could spend the rest of it making amends for what I'd done. She'd wandered so far from Highcrest's border I knew she didn't intend on going back."

"No one would wander that far into those woods otherwise, and no other tracks were near hers. I carried her across the forest, searching for a place to keep her safe. I remembered sniffing around what I'd thought was an abandoned manor and brought her here. The rest is history."

My fingers traced the raised edges of the mark. "You proved them wrong, though." I rested my chin on his chest and stared into his delightfully dark eyes. "There is always redemption."



Mira



Adjusting to Dante's human form had been as easy as breathing. We carried on like normal, afternoons by the fire with a book, game nights with Calista and Jasper. Snuggling in each other's arms at night.

Calista had been using her seer abilities to keep tabs on Marvoe, but shielding magic blocked him from view. He'd wanted my blood to get access to my magic. Anytime those memories came up, I sought refuge in Dante's embrace—my safe place.

There had been rumors that more residents of Argora Vale had been fleeing south. We'd learned of a camp that many wound up in, sitting between the borders of the two kingdoms.

The booths at the market continued dwindling in number, but I hadn't dared step outside since the night Marvoe's men came for me. But I had missed walking in the fresh air and grew more resentful over the chokehold my fear had on me.

The afternoon sun broke through the gray sheet of clouds, and the birds in the trees called to me as I peered out the bedroom window. "Dante, I want to go for a walk."

He smiled, a twinkle of pride in his eyes. "Then let's go."

We passed Jasper and Alaina in the kitchen. He still practiced his baking, and admittedly it'd come a long way. However, baking supplies were rapidly deteriorating.

"When you two get back, I should have this loaf done! It's lemon! Alaina had some rotten lemons in storage," he said. I'd never seen someone so excited over rotten fruit.

"Good thing spring is around the corner. We're desperately low on supplies. Might even go hungry for a time before the first harvest," she added, her face turning grim.

The only thing able to dampen our good spirits was talk of the famine and the curse. They knew now that the blessing they thought I'd had was hearsay, and understood why I kept quiet.

"We're excited to try it, Jasper. I'm sure it will be delicious," I said.

"Speak for yourself," Dante muttered in my ear, and I pushed my elbow into his gut. He feigned taking a hard blow.

We made it outside, walking arm in arm, listening to the birds. During a moment when my happiness had become too much to bear, I dashed into the forest, leaving Dante behind. He never let me get far ahead, and the thrill of him on my heels had me giggling.

Sprinting through the open wood cleansed the memory of confines. The way I ran now, as I laughed, was the most playful I'd ever been with another person. It wasn't about gaining distance; it was about the release of burdens that no longer weighed us down.

Eventually, he pinned me to a tree and kissed me with such force it made my knees buckle.

"No fair," I complained when he broke the kiss and I could finally catch my breath. "You didn't give me a head start!"

"I can't help myself, green eyes." Clouds of his warm breath skated across my neck, pebbling my skin. He fed kisses along it, and I could feel desire leaking between my thighs.

"You make me *feral*," he growled.

Maybe as payback for making me yearn for him, I could repay the favor. "Well, what if you give me a minute, let me gain some distance, and then if you catch me..." I let my gaze flick down to his pulled-too-tight trousers. My tongue skirted across my upper lip as I lifted my gaze back to him.

He growled and pressed his chest into mine, squishing my breasts between us, making them tighten.

"You won't make it ten feet," he taunted, taking my bottom lip in between his teeth and scraping.

"Promise?" Pushing my chest into his only spurred him on and I knew it.

Something predatory shone in his eyes. Pulling back, he raised his chin to me in a challenge.

Plumes of breath rushed out from my quickening heartbeat over the anticipation.

Then I sprinted.

You wouldn't think I actually wanted him to catch me with how hard I pushed myself, but that only added to the fun.

The thrill of him hunting me down added a fire to my strides. Too soon did I hear his taunting warning call, but I kept pushing, relishing the wide-open freedom around me. No cells. No locks.

The main road fell before me, and I hadn't realized we'd come that far from the manor. The white expanse of over-trodden, packed down snow stretched for miles in each direction. As soon as my boots hit it, running became less of a strain.

I looked over my shoulder, seeing Dante break through the trees. Laughter erupted from my chest, which made me naturally lose speed.

I loved him. I loved what we had. I slowed, turning to meet him, struggling to catch my breath.

He caught up, slowing down before he reached me. "You're giving up?" he asked, his chest rising and falling in rhythm.

"I've run from too many things in my life. You're not one I want to add to the list."

"Again, you mean?" He chuckled, placing his hands on his hips through labored breaths.

I laughed, recalling our first night together. "Yes. Not again."

My lungs burned as I tilted my head up toward the sky, taking in the fresh cool air. The clouds chased away the sun, but I could tell it would be back soon. Once we recovered enough to quit gasping, he came up to me, sunk his fingers into my hair and tugged, holding my head back so he could drive a hard kiss into me. I hummed from his strength.

When he broke the kiss, I could tell he was gearing up to say something, but his face fell, and he looked beyond me down the road.

"What is it?" I looked, but saw nothing.

"I can hear... something." Squinting his vision, he tried discerning whatever noise he'd heard.

"Horses," he decided. "Good thing I didn't take up your offer, or we'd have an audience." He wrapped his arm around my shoulders, and we started walking home.

Dante paused. "A lot of horses?" he questioned, facing the oncoming travelers.

Within a minute, I heard the horse's hooves for myself as they came into view. A few horses led the way of a carriage, and more followed behind.

"A convoy?" Dante questioned aloud.

One of the lead horsemen raised a flag, and my stomach dropped.

I recognized that shade of blue.

"It's not a convoy," I whispered. A cold sweat broke over my skin. "It's an army."

I pulled the hood over my head, racing to tuck in my vibrant red curls as a man broke away from the group and galloped over to us.

"You there! Halt!" The sound of screeching metal rang out as he unsheathed his sword.

Dante's fingers dug into my hip, but I knew it was futile. There's only one reason the army would travel this far into The Cursed Kingdom.

Me.

"Lower your hood, girl." His horse stomped in place, huffing as horses do.

"We'll be taking our leave now," Dante's firm voice set up a barrier between them.

The glint of the sword appeared in front of my face, pointed at Dante. "Not until I say so. Remove the hood, or I'll remove it for you."

Before he finished his threat, I set my hand upon Dante's chest, holding him back. He'd die by this sword trying to protect me, and that's exactly what would happen. I'd seen how the prince's guardsmen cut down anyone in their way. I wouldn't let that happen.

But there was only one thing I could do. Perhaps the most painful thing I'd ever done. Slipping my fingers under the rim of my hood, I let it fall, exposing my identifying hair.

"Sir, this man saved me." I faced the soldier, his eyes widening when he discovered who I was.

"Mira, what are you—" Dante tried pulling me toward him, but I removed myself from his touch.

"A great beast had taken me into the forest. It held me captive for weeks." My gaze connected with Dante as I looked over my shoulder. "This man saved me." The cold air hit the gathering wetness in my eyes.

As a man, Dante would not win against this battalion. If I didn't stop him, I knew he'd fight for me, anyway.

"He slayed the beast. I know the Prince would be very appreciative of the man who returned his Coveted. A great prize I'm sure he'd love to bestow, a man revered by the kingdom for his bravery. An ally to Prince Nicholas from the kingdom beyond the curse."

The rest of the traveling party caught up, hearing my declaration. The soldier in front of me exchanged glances with his men. He returned the sword to its sheath as men jumped from their horses and approached us.

"Indeed," the soldier said.

"Mira, don't—" I cut him off before he revealed more of our relationship.

"Thank you, kind sir, for saving my life. The prince owes you a debt of gratitude. I will see that you are rewarded for your

efforts." Before anyone had a chance to force me, I walked to the carriage.

My escorts fell into formation around me, one of them opening the door. With one last glance, I gazed at the man I loved, willing to give up our happy life if it meant keeping him safe. Confusion, anger, and hurt marked his features, his stunningly gorgeous features. I would dream of that face every day for the rest of my life.

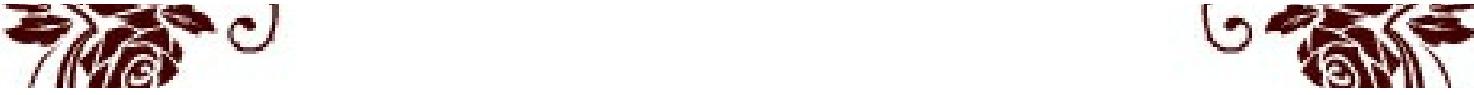
As a tear fell, I stepped inside the carriage.

"As the lady said, the Prince would be amenable to some sort of reward. Make your way to the castle, and it shall be arranged."

I sighed a breath of relief at the muffled words. I'd done enough that they left him alone.

The carriage swayed, being redirected through the snow. Three guards sat in the small interior with me, but a room never felt more empty. With my composure cracking with every bump and sway that led me away from the only happiness I'd ever known, my cheeks became coated in an endless stream of tears.

I love you, Dante. I'm sorry.



Mira



Two days of continuous riding brought me back to the castle gates.

I hadn't spoken since. Not because of a clever tactic, but because part of me died the moment I'd pulled back that hood. I'd told Dante a beast held me captive, and I hoped he wouldn't take that to heart.

I'd also told him he saved my life. Which he did. He let me finally experience joy and love. A life without that now seemed hollow, leaving me a husk of the woman I'd grown to be. What was there to say after that?

The group of six guards escorted me inside the castle walls, and Adalene rushed to greet me, offering praises to the gods for my safe return. She was the smallest morsel of hope to my starving soul, but I couldn't force a smile.

She talked around me, reasoning I must be in shock, that I'd gone through a terrible ordeal. We swept through the halls of the castle. Even though my gaze fell low, my feet took me through the familiar halls without a thought. I resented the navy blue carpet passing beneath me.

We entered my old room, and Adalene started prepping my night clothes and folded down the bedding. Without care, I padded over to the bed and slipped between the covers, tossing the thick blanket back over me until I was fully covered.

"Oh," Adalene said in surprise. "Alright. You rest. I'm so glad you're back safe, Mira. I'll bring you breakfast first thing. If you're hungry, there's biscuits on the tea tray on your dresser. Good night."

I could hear the smile on her face. She thought being back here was the best outcome.

It wasn't.

My door closed behind her, and for the first time since leaving Dante, no one could hear my cries. My pillow quickly became damp. The look on Dante's face as I swiftly chose to walk away drove a knife through my heart.

I longed for the feel of his face under my palm, his shoulder length hair threaded through my fingers, and the warmth of his chest on my cheek.

I cried until my head pounded, a sniffling, undone mess. On the off chance Calista could see me, I would repeat my grief out loud. "Tell Dante I'm sorry. I couldn't let him get hurt."

But talking to her felt like talking to the gods—I would never know if I'd been heard.



The door creaked open after a dull knock pulled me from sleep.

"Good morning, Mira. I hope you slept well. I've brought you a nice big breakfast! While you eat, I'll run you a bath." Adalene swept through the space in her usual fashion, I could tell even though my face remained buried.

"I'm not hungry," I lied, my stomach grumbling lowly, but I'd rather hurt under the covers, isolated and alone, than face the light of day and have happy smiles greet me.

"Nonsense." She tsked. "You couldn't have had more than soldiers' rations for days. We've the seamstress coming in just a couple of hours, and she won't appreciate working on someone dirty who smells horrid, so we need to get you in the bath."

"Why is she coming?" It took everything in me to summon the strength to ask the question. I just wanted to fade away.

"The Prince is going to host a celebration dinner for you, of course! It's being planned now. He's giving you a few days to rest, but to make a brand new dress takes time so we mustn't dally. Up, up." She tossed the blankets off me, yanking me from the darkness of the safe haven I'd cocooned in.

I slapped my hands over my eyes to shield them from the penetrating light.

Silence stretched over a few moments. "Mira, I don't know what happened to you out there. You were gone for weeks. I can't imagine. But I've seen this before. When things feel so bleak, and we've temporarily lost our way, we can easily give up." She rested her hand on my shoulder. "Don't give in. I'll fight for you until you can fight for yourself. Now sit up, please."

She gently rolled me over and started adjusting my pillows. I complied, if only for the effort she'd made for me. Once she placed the tray over my lap and got me situated, she wandered to the bathroom. The familiar loud rush of water in the large, gold-plated basin only made me ache for the tinier tub at the manor.

The tantalizing scent of fresh hot food made my stomach nearly claw its way up my throat to get to it. Seasoned potatoes, a croissant, seared ham slathered in syrup, eggs, a side of red berries and orange juice adorned the tray.

The thought of reaching for the fork made me drown in guilt. I shouldn't enjoy anything here. But my mouth literally watered, and my body begged.

After a few bites, chewing grew exhausting. I had no reason to revel in the savory spices on my tongue. My despair turned the food bland. I'd thought of the meals that Jasper and Calista would cook, not nearly as tasty as the castle chefs, but I missed them.

Sadness spoiled my appetite, and I left half of the meal untouched when I finally set my fork and knife down on the plate. Adalene walked from the bathroom.

"Oh, that's a good girl. Valiant effort." She offered a sweet smile. Removing the tray, she instructed me to get in the bath.

Surrounded by warm water, bubbles, and the scent of citrus and lavender, my spirits still sank into dark depths. Adalene worked a lather in my hair, but I was barely present.

My soul didn't feel alive anymore. It sat in an empty field, nothing but barren trees and the wind blowing around. Might as well have dug a hole in the ground and settled in.

Moments I would see Dante's face in a memory stirred me back to life, only to have my heart ripped out with the reality that I wouldn't see him again.

Barely remembering how I got here, I sat in the chair before the vanity as Adalene worked a brush through my wet hair. A light purple silk robe hugged my body, but all I could do was stare off into the empty parts of myself. No comfort could coax me back.

Adalene didn't speak while she worked continuously to get me prepped and ready for the seamstress. A gentle touch of her hand on my shoulder every so often helped me not to feel so deafeningly alone. Still, I couldn't force a smile at her attempts.

The seamstress came in as I sat on the sofa in front of the fire. Adalene placed me there so my hair would dry faster. I ignored their pleasantries and chatter until Adalene assisted me to my feet and escorted me to the dressing stool.

I recognized the raven hair. Tula. Thinking I couldn't feel any more low had been a mistake. A new found wave of guilt crashed over me.

"Shoot, I forgot the shoe options," Tula reprimanded herself, shaking her head vigorously. The circles under her eyes were darker than the last time I'd remembered.

"I'll get them! You start." Adalene set her hands on my hips, looking at me through the reflection in the mirror. "I'll be right back. You can do this."

I tipped my chin ever so slightly, the only effort I cared to make. She smiled and then floated out of the room.

"Get your head together," Tula mumbled.

"What?" I asked, thinking she might have been directing it toward me.

"Sorry, Miss. Just one of those days." The smile she flashed looked familiar. Forced.

"What's wrong?" Why did I ask? Did I think extending her kindness would ease my guilt over knowing about her father? I shouldn't be inviting her to share her troubles while harboring this secret.

"Nothing you need to worry about, Miss. Family troubles." She stood up, preparing her pins. "Do you have any siblings, Miss?"

"I don't." But I knew she did. A sister with a rebellious nature.

"Count yourself lucky. Younger siblings can be a pain, even when all you do is try and help." She sighed, shaking her head again. "It's hard being the oldest. Means you also have to be a parent."

An uncomfortable lump formed in my throat, and the food in my stomach turned to boiling mush.

"Tula..." Hot vomit wanted to make an appearance.

"Yes, Miss?" She fiddled with the fabric pieces on the floor.

"I have something to tell you... About your father."

She froze, then cleared her throat. "Wow, the Coveted's powers are indeed true."

The mention of my gift caught me off guard. "Pardon?"

Rising to her feet, she smoothed out the creases in her dress. "I've been wanting to know what's happened to my father for quite some time." Her gaze rose to mine. I could see her steel herself for the impending news.

It didn't matter that my reputation was built on lies. This girl wanted to hear about her father, and I had the answer. I could help in this small way.

“He’s passed.”

Her eyes fell shut, and she swayed on her feet. Taking a centering inhale, she blew it out, forming an “o” shape with her mouth. “I suspected as such. It’s unlike him to just disappear. He only ever tried to provide for my sister and I, but his cough grew worse. I imagine he knew his time was nearing, and couldn’t bear my sister and I having to take care of him and watch. That stubborn man.”

Her laugh faltered as sorrow furrowed her brow.

“He tried to save himself, so he wouldn’t put you and your sister through the loss.”

“What did he do?” Confusion glazed her eyes.

I debated keeping it cryptic. Did she need to know the lengths her father went to kidnapping me? Dying by the sword of the Prince’s army?

Although, I was the last person to spend time with him. As painful as it would be to relive it, I was sure it would provide her closure. I would no longer be part of saving a kingdom from a curse, but I could save this poor girl from a lifetime of unanswered questions.

“Like you, he had heard of my abilities. He thought if he had me, I could cure him.”

Her eyes turned glassy.

I wanted to tell her it was a lie, to tell the world what they thought of me had been wrong. But my tongue wouldn’t allow it. I’d have to navigate life the way I had before, shrouded in secrecy and silence when it came to my magic. But I didn’t have to protect others’ horrid actions in the process.

“He brought me to your cabin. We were there for weeks.”

Recognition made her eyes flutter over the gathering tears.

“When the prince’s army came, they killed him so they could take me.” Bold of me. Slander of the prince surely wouldn’t bode well in my favor.

She shuddered, taking in the news.

I could offer her some comfort. “He spoke of you, your family. Nothing mattered more to him than you girls. He lit up when he spoke of you and your passion for dresses. Said he could never keep the details of it all straight.”

She huffed out a laugh, and a tear hit the floor. Angling her face to the ceiling, she replied, “He never could remember anything I told him about it. I thought I bothered him with my endless chatter.”

“Not at all. He loved watching your ambition. He was proud of you.” My eyes warmed as I recalled the look on his face by the fire, recanting about the women he loved so dearly.

“I’m sorry.” I offered my condolences.

“Thank you. I’m sorry for you, that you had to witness that.”

Her words sparked the memory of the sword plunging into his chest. The look in his eyes as he fell. I blinked it away.

Adalene re-entered the room, balancing a few pairs of shoes in her hold. “Alright, things are back in order.” Her skirts bristled with every step. She approached, taking note of our body language.

“Is...everything okay here?” Her eyes darted between the two of us.

“Yes.” Tula straightened, resetting her face to a cheery disposition. She glanced back at me, holding my gaze while she finished, “Everything’s good.”



Dante



It happened so fast. One minute, she rested securely under my grasp, and the next, I had a sword in my face, watching her walk away.

Being human had never felt more unnatural. If I were still a beast, these soldiers wouldn't have stood a chance, and she'd be at my side. This mortal form would have failed too fast if I'd tried anything. I would die for her, I knew that, but she was leaving to protect me. Made up some lie about me slaying the beast that took her, painting me as someone the prince should reward instead of hold responsible.

If dying by the sword would save her, I would do it. But all it would do is stain the snow with my blood, leaving her still in their hands to mourn me. I couldn't save her if I was dead.

I begged her not to do this. "Mira, don't—"

She interrupted, speaking over me, silencing me. My head spun in a daze as I watched the soldiers turn back. When the carriage faded out of sight, I fell to my knees. Her footprints marked the ground—until they didn't.

Blood pumped in my veins like a raging tempest searching for a way to escape. I released a roar into the forest, projecting not nearly as far as my beastly one would have. Birds didn't flutter from the trees, woodland creatures didn't flee from their burrows, and I was crushed by the absence of everything.

My eyes bulged, frantic and wide. I needed to do something. I wouldn't live without her.

I couldn't.

My feet slammed into the earth, sending me flying through the woods until I reached the manor. The wooden frame quaked, a loud crack resounding off the wall as I burst through the front door.

Calista and Jasper jumped in the sitting room from the impact. My lungs fought for breath, completely exhausted, and I internally cursed this human form. Black spots clouded my vision as sweat beaded my brow, and I fell to my knees, barely able to keep myself upright any longer from the exertion.

"King, what's going on?" Calista rushed to me, and Jasper followed behind.

Falling to my hands, sweat dripped onto the floor and soaked strands of hair hung around my face. "They took her."

"Who did?!" Jasper growled. "Marvoe?!" His wings flared, sending the sharp talons on the end piercing through the wall. "That bastard, I'll fucking rip his—"

"No, Highcrest. The prince's army." I heaved like a dog trying to spit out the words as I battled for air.

"Shit." Calista scrambled to her feet and ran to retrieve her crystal ball.

Jasper yanked me up, but I staggered to follow after her, needing to see what she discovered. He struggled to keep me upright because I propelled myself with no forethought, tripping over my own feet.

We finally reached Calista, and I gazed into the glass to see Mira swaying in the back of the carriage.

"How many of them were there? I can go get her," Jasper offered without hesitation.

"There's too many. A couple dozen. They're all armed, of course they would be, daring to enter Argora Vale." I wiped away the moisture on my skin, clearing my vision. "We have to get her."

"Our best chance is before she crosses the boundary. Calista, scan the route between her and the castle. Maybe there's a traveling group that can help. I can fly there and coordinate something, so we catch them by surprise," Jasper said.

Calista's hands moved fluidly over the ball. "Ah, shit."

Another group of the army laid in wait within the forest, tripling their current numbers. I clenched my jaw. We wouldn't be able to organize a group large enough to rival them.

"I have to see Evenita," I growled, trying to stand on my own.

"Woah there, King, easy." Jasper supported my fumbling frame.

"Take me to her!" My palm slapped against the skin on his chest, but he barely budged. The entire time I'd known him, I'd

always been stronger. That was no longer the case. A continual reminder of how weak I'd become.

"Listen, you need your strength. Eat and drink something before you go, and Jasper can fly you there," Calista admonished. He'd always been a faster traveler than me, but at least my beast frame could almost keep up. Now, he was my only fighting chance. Calista ran to the kitchen, retrieving what food we had left.

"Maybe I can negotiate with the prince. Mira told the guard the prince would owe me for rescuing his *Coveted*." I spat out the word. That fucking title. She was more than that.

Jasper sighed. "I don't think he'll reward you with the thing he's sent his army to retrieve."

"SHE'S NOT A THING!" I snapped, shoving his arm off from around me. Without his support, I collapsed into the chair. "She's not an object. She's not her magic." The words broke apart in my mouth.

"You know that's not what I meant," Jasper conceded, lowering his voice. I knew he didn't mean it, but my heart fucking ached for her. I'd seen the vacancy in her eyes in the back of that carriage. Forced to return to a life she felt trapped in, because of selfish humans desiring glory or power. I grasped the concept before, but it really hit home now.

"I have to get her back, Jas. Whatever the cost." My gaze met his, a fiery determination scorching my blurry eyes.

"Whatever the cost," he repeated back to me, extending his hand.

I slapped mine into his, and he hoisted me to my feet.



We soared through the air, but even the cloak I wore couldn't fight off the bitter cold. He followed the main route until the recognizable fork in the road appeared.

"Turn left," I shouted over the whipping wind.



Mira



“I t’s simply perfect!” Adalene gushed over the scraps that adorned my body, held together with precisely placed pins.

“I’ll get to work on it right away,” Tula said as she started packing up her things.

After they’d worked to get me out, Tula left, and Adalene brought me a simple dress to slide over my slip.

“I think some fresh air will do you some good.”

“Adalene, I—” I went to protest.

“Ah ah.” She held up a hand. “We will go for a brief walk, get a little fresh air, a bit of sunlight. And after that, you can crawl right back into that big bed. We’ll be quick.”

I could barely muster the energy to protest a walk, let alone argue with her. She dressed me in a new cloak, hat, mittens, scarf, and sturdy boots. Clothing I once revered now weighed me down like shackles. We walked through the castle, stopping at her servants’ quarters so she could dress adequately.

She opened her door, and a man straightened himself from her bed when he saw me. It took me by surprise, but I quickly recognized him. The guard, Archeron.

“Miss Mira.” He shot to his feet.

“Hi.” I didn’t bother to sound enthusiastic, and no smile greeted him.

“Thank you, Miss Mira. I never would have had the courage to ask Addy out myself, but when she asked me on a date, my world became brighter,” Archeron said.

Adalene rummaged through her trunk, gathering her outdoor clothes. “Yes, Miss Mira inspired me to be bold and take a chance.”

He admired her while she had no idea he was looking, distracted with dressing herself.

“Such a blessing to have her back with us,” Adalene gushed.

“A blessing to some is a curse to others,” I said, melancholy coating my words.

There was a brief pause, as if the air in the room had turned stale.

“You should get ready for your shift, Archie,” Adalene said, rising to her feet to give him a kiss on the cheek.

He nodded, and she motioned for us to continue down the hall.

We stepped into the familiar courtyard still dusted with snow, though the air didn’t contain its usual chill—a sign that spring lingered around the corner. The world would first need to go through its dirty transformation, until eventually the mud dried to dirt and the dead grass woke from its slumber.

Not even the promise of warm weather lifted my spirits. All I could see was how ugly the world was about to become. New guard posts remained scattered along the interior of the courtyard. I would never be left alone here again.

We ventured around the fountain, Adalene’s arm hooking in mine, to drag me along, no doubt.

“Mira...” She seemed hesitant. “I’m sorry you don’t wish to be here. It’s selfish to want you here, because of your blessing, but...”

Trying to subdue the rising anger in my gut that awaited a lecture I’d heard many times before, I craned my neck to the side, fighting off the tension. *The world needs your blessing. You have a gift that shouldn’t be wasted. You can change so many lives.*

“Surely if anyone can change your circumstance, it’s you, right?”

I snapped my gaze to her and stood in place. “What?” That couldn’t have been more opposite to what I’d expected her to say.

“Your blessing, granting desires. Can you not make it work for yourself? I would miss you terribly, but—” A call from the top of the courtyard bellowed into the garden.

“Addy! We need all hands!”

Looking over my shoulder, I spotted the woman who was clearly Matron Magda, based on the descriptions.

“Coming!” Adalene shouted in reply, releasing my arm. “I’m sorry Mira, I have to go. The guards will escort you back to your room. I will see you later.” She leaned in, pressing her cheek to mine and kissing the air beside it.

Before I could say anything, she’d already climbed half the stairs back.

My blessing wasn’t what she thought it was. Yet, her words implanted under my skin.

My entire life had been an act of submission, a practice in self-preservation. I’d had nothing to live for except the next breath.

That wasn’t the case now. I had a life that I’d somehow managed to carve from my circumstance. Friends. A love. A purpose bigger than myself.

Why wasn’t I fighting for that?

Because it could get me killed? What kind of life would I have left to live, anyway? A fire of resolve burned inside me, setting the invisible ropes of restraint and fear that’d bound me my whole life aflame. No one had put those on me. I’d done it myself.

Which meant I could take them off.

I never believed it was possible—until now.

“I *can* make my life what *I* want. I *can* be brave. I *can* choose to say no. I can end this fucking nightmare of an existence.”

A wave of magic washed over me. My own magic. Feelings of realization, clarity, resolve, and confidence rooted in my very soul.

My veins ignited, and a flash of red light rippled off me in violent waves. A boom shocked through the sky. I looked up, still enveloped in blaring brightness, watching as the light stretched to the clouds and its veins spread throughout the sky.

The light dissipated.

My chest heaved, and my mind spun. I believed I could break free of my shackles.

So I did.



Dante



My paws slapped with thunderous resound, and my claws leached into the snowy tundra, tearing it with every bound. A shredded path laid in my wake—I had already wasted too much time.

Jasper flew overhead, struggling to keep up. I pushed my restored form to its limits.

Evenita had given me elixirs and tonics to aid my recovery. Bonnie's spell took a greater toll this round.

Jasper brought me to the door, questioning my decision.

"It doesn't matter, Jasper. She's all that matters," I said, holding firm. My knuckles rapped on the door.

"Come in."

We gave each other a look before I stepped inside. The cottage's roof peaked to a point, and the loft with a bed overlooked the rest of the living space. A fire in a spacious hearth filled the room with an orange glow. The white-haired woman turned.

"Bonnie," I greeted.

"My, my. Isn't that face a sight for sore eyes." Her gaze widened as she approached, her burgundy lace dress sweeping the floor behind her. "I didn't think I'd ever see it again. Didn't think I'd want to." The tenor in her voice dropped. "But this can only mean one thing. You've changed." She smiled.

"I need you to change me back," I blurted out. My legs were still so weary, I had to lean on the table for support. Curse this mortal form.

She chortled, brow furrowing in disbelief. "What?"

I couldn't blame her. Surely, it was a shock to hear. "Someone is in trouble, and I can't save her like this." My hand gestured along my body.

"You must be joking?"

"Can you do it?" I raised my voice, signaling the end of my patience.

She paused, taking a moment to trace her stare up and down my human form. "You would sacrifice the thing you've wanted for decades, for...?" The tilt of her head and cock of an eyebrow pressed me to respond.

I swallowed the lump in my throat, questioning if revealing my love for another woman would hinder or help me. But lying and deceit had gotten me into this mess. "A woman."

Jasper shifted uneasily behind me. He was well aware of mine and Bonnie's past, and I could hear his thoughts screaming the same concerns I had. But I wouldn't risk Mira by lying.

"A woman," she sing-songed, fighting a jesting grin. "Oh Dante, this is...surprising."

"Bonnie, please." I didn't care if it sounded like begging. It was.

She chewed on her cheek, tapping her foot while her glare bounced between me and Jasper. "I'm going to cast the same spell," she warned.

"All I ask is that I can be aware enough to know what I'm doing, if even just for a day. Can your magic do that?" Recalling the horror of being a feral monster made me wince.

She inhaled deeply, the sound nearly deafening as I awaited her reply.

"Dante..." Jasper begged me to reconsider.

"Done," Bonnie said. "Until your mission is complete. You will take the form of the monster that you truly are," Bonnie started.

Soon, the purple glow filled the room like a bursting sun, burning down the life I had worked to build within an instant.

What I hadn't expected to happen was for the magic to almost kill me. Because I barely had any strength, the transfiguration knocked me unconscious for a full day. Jasper had dragged me to Evenita's cottage, and she'd worked on restoring me back to health.

Calista and Jasper stayed by my side. Calista kept tabs on Mira through her crystal, and when I finally had enough strength, I left.

Jasper joined. In case I couldn't make it out of there, someone would have to take Mira and get her away, quickly.

We raced through the woods, and I delighted in the strength I possessed again. I could actually rescue Mira, and that's all that mattered to me. I ran the entire way, only starting to slow down when Highcrest came into view.

We stuck to the edge of the trees, getting as close to the castle as we could. I needed to be fast. If villagers started a panic, the guards would be made aware of my presence. The scent of leathers and body odor permeated the forest, and I could sniff out exactly where the nearest set of soldiers patrolled. My animalistic hearing honed in on the distinct sound of metal. Soldiers by the sound of it, more than last time.

I skidded to a halt when a beam of red lightning shot into the sky, casting a red glow over the castle.

Mira was there. I could feel it.

Without further thought, I broke from the tree line and set for the castle gardens. Screams erupted, but I paid no attention. My only aim was getting over that castle wall and getting her out.

Mira



I gave my body a once over to make sure I was alright.

“Miss, are you—” a timid soldier began to ask, when shouts filled the courtyard.

“Over there!”

“The beast is back!”

“Kill it!”

I turned, seeing Dante’s beast form land in the gardens. Soldiers raced to him from every direction, readying their swords. Their weapons would have no chance if Dante had turned feral, but I suspected he wouldn’t have had the clarity to track me down if he was.

“Wait, stop!” I shouted, joining them in the dash to the creature in the yard, nearly tripping over this gods damned dress.

“Mira!” Dante’s voice cast a warmth over me, like the light of daybreak over a dark night. My eyes set on the soldier getting too close from behind with his sword drawn.

“Look out!” I pointed.

He turned, and one swipe of his paw sent the soldier flying across the courtyard, his shouts hanging in the air until he landed, tumbling in the snow. The sight made a few soldiers stop their advance. One stupid brave soul continued, raising his sword high. Attempting to bring it down on the beast, Dante leapt, clearing the height of the soldier and his weapon, landing behind him, and swiping him away the same as the last.

With the soldiers firmly set in place, no longer on the offensive, I continued running. When I got to him, he embraced me. “I’m getting you out of here.”

He secured his arm around my waist and began scaling the stone wall. When we crested over the top, he froze, and I saw why. The prince’s army surrounded the castle, rows and rows of men armed with weapons created an uncrossable sea. Canons faced the castle walls, intent on stopping whoever planned on leaving.

Dante growled, his breathing now sporadic.

“We won’t make it out of here,” I admitted, defeat crushing my hopes of mimicking our last escape. “But I won’t let even an army stand in my way. Set me down.”

We dropped back into the courtyard, men still standing at the ready to strike him down if he came close. A flood of more soldiers rushed into the courtyard, drawing my attention. A bunch of them parted, and in the middle, recognizable blond hair adorned with a crown and royal armor stepped forward.

“Surround the creature!” he ordered, and his men started their organized execution.

“Wait!” I called, holding out my hands. Obviously, they didn’t listen to me, and only stopped once they fell into their circled formation. Clinking metal drowned out my initial call, but once they placed themselves, the courtyard fell eerily silent.

“Prince Nicholas, wait,” I tried again.

“Mira, it won’t hurt you again. Ready!” He raised his arm, and the soldiers fixed their weapons with deadly precision.

“I love him!” I screamed.

Just as I suspected, looks of confusion broke their serious, intent gazes. No one spoke a word, not even Prince Nicholas as he tried understanding what I’d said.

“My blessing has been broken.” My voice blanketed the snowy yard. “I can no longer serve you. I ask that you’ll let us go. No blood will be shed, your people protected, I give you my word, *if* you let us leave.” My heart felt like it lodged in my throat. A cold sweat broke over my palms under my mittens, but I wouldn’t remain silent.

“Rumors of The Coveted have ruined my entire life. It took me a while to realize that I didn’t have to live by them anymore. That red light you saw? That was my blessing breaking. I am no longer bound by magic, and I am no longer interested in residing here. I love this creature, and I wish to leave with him.” I pointed to the beast they all saw him as. “He will harm no

one, if you just let us go.”

The soldiers Dante had tossed groaned as they rose to their feet, holding their bruised sides.

Gazes passed between soldiers, and the prince took a considerable amount of time silently assessing the situation.

Tension thickened the crisp air, and my lungs cramped from the anxiety building in my chest. A group of three soldiers broke off, inching forward. Not enough to reach us, but the advance was unsettling.

Dante released a deep, threatening growl. It bounced off my back in waves, his ferocity sinking into my bones. It gave me chills. In an instant, a bloody battle could ensue, and dread fused my feet to the ground.

The soldiers froze, receiving the warning loud and clear. My gaze remained glued to the prince, who stood elevated, looking down over us. He took a deep inhale before speaking to me.

“You are sure?” The prince’s question wasn’t threatening, but genuine, even though he spoke in a commanding way.

“Yes,” my voice almost faltered in relief as tears blurred my sight.

Our silent standoff continued for a moment. The prince raised his hand, closed his glove covered fist into a ball and pulled it down. In response, the soldiers around us all lowered their weapons.

A cloud of warm, relieved breath flooded out from my lungs. Dante stepped forward, his body touching mine. A few guards raised their swords out of reaction to his movement.

“You’ll call the army away from the walls? Let us leave peacefully?” I called to Nicholas.

He leaned over, speaking to one of the decorated army leaders.

“Fall back!” the commander shouted.

Scurrying boots through the snow led them out of the garden, funneling back through the entrance to the courtyard. The prince remained with a dozen guards.

“Where will it take you? Are you sure you’ll be safe?” the blond prince asked.

Spinning around, I placed my palm on Dante’s chest. I smiled, not only with my mouth, but with my eyes. I don’t know how or why he had become a beast, but he was still *him*.

“I don’t need an army to fight my battles for me, if that’s what you’re asking,” Dante called, stiffening his posture.

“It speaks,” the commander commented, but I could barely hear his words because of the distance.

They hadn’t known Dante was just a cursed man, and I hoped this wouldn’t change the prince’s intentions to let us go. Whipping my head back to assess their reactions, the prince held his stare. His face remained stoic, not revealing whatever thoughts were running through his mind.

“Miss Mira, all I wish for is your safety. The army is being cleared from the gate now,” he said, and my shoulders released their tension.

The commander leaned in, whispering to the prince. I think Dante could hear, because he rested his paw around my waist and his grip tensed.

“What is it?” I asked him.

“The commander is proposing trouble.”

Returning my gaze to the prince, I watched as he shook his head.

“I hope this makes us allies,” he called to us, dismissing the commander.

Allies?

“Or at least, not enemies.” He smiled.

“Not enemies,” Dante replied, apparently reluctant to accept the other title.

“Good enough,” Prince Nicholas shouted. “You can either leave through the castle or over the wall once it’s cleared. I wish for no trouble here or for my citizens.” He gestured to the stone that held no limitations for Dante.

“I’m not walking into that castle,” Dante whispered, malice directed toward the building that’d bound me like a cage.

“I understand,” I said to him. “Thank you, Your Highness,” I shouted across the courtyard.

“Please.” He waved his hand. “Nicholas.” He flashed that charming smile, and I saw the glimpse of the man I thought him to be at first. Kind, respectful. So why would he refuse to help his people? I didn’t need to understand his reasoning, because I had another kingdom to worry about. A kingdom I couldn’t wait to get back to.

He knew we came from Argora Vale. Maybe his army had discovered some residents, and the inhabitants there no longer remained a secret. Maybe that’s what he’d meant by allies.

When Dante saw it was clear over the wall, he scooped me in his arm and hauled me over. This time, I didn’t have the fear of being eaten by a wolf creature, and the whole experience made me laugh.

Approaching the forest, movement in the sky drew my attention. I recognized those jagged, gray wings soaring above our heads. I pointed, unwrapping one of my arms around Dante’s neck to show him.

“Look! It’s Jasper!”

As if I’d summoned him, he dove toward us.

“King! I’m sorry, I tried to follow you, but they started shooting fucking arrows. One clipped me.” He fingered at his ribs where a wound marked his skin. “Did you see the size of that army? How did you guys get out?!”

“It wasn’t me. It was Mira,” Dante said.

Jasper looked at me, the whites of his eyes wide with astonishment, until they fell. “Actually, that makes sense, too.” He smirked.

Dante held me cradled in his arms, and the three of us continued through the forest. I sunk into the soft fur that covered his entire body again. I lifted my head to ask, “How did this happen?”

“I told you, I would do anything for you.”

The end of his statement was clipped by emotions building in his throat, and suddenly uneasiness rippled throughout my gut. “Dante... How did this happen?” my tone dropped.

He looked at Jasper, who cast a brief glance back at him.

“What’s going on?” I pressed. Tension settled around us, and the air filled with everything unspoken they held back.

Dante adjusted me in his arms, holding me tighter. My heart withered in my chest, making it almost painful to beat.

“I sought out Bonnie,” he finally said.

“The witch who cursed you...” I acknowledged, wheels turning in my brain.

“I knew I couldn’t get to you in my human form. I had to be a beast.”

Reality started to cast its shadow over my understanding, darkening my world. “But, but that’s alright, right? You broke it before, so you can just, break it again.”

“I don’t know how to break it this time, Mira. And I don’t care. All that matters is that you’re safe. Free. Enough about me breaking my curse, you said you broke yours?”

I wasn’t ready to move on from the subject, but clearly he was. Maybe that wouldn’t be the worst thing in the world, if he remained a beast. Yes, I would miss his touch. Desperately. Whole-heartedly. Having him though, in my arms, meant more to me than that.

I fell for him in this form. His heart would shine through, no matter what he looked like. So, I obliged his attempt to end the conversation on the subject.

Clearing my throat while trying to keep the tears at bay, I answered, “Yes, um. I decided that I should be the one in charge of my life. And my actual blessing allowed me to believe it.” I stroked the fur around the back of his neck, leaning my cheek on his furry chest. “I had something worth fighting my way back to.”

“You’re incredible, Mira,” he whispered, resting his chin on the crown of my head.

His steps continued as we embraced each other. Jasper remained quiet beside us, oddly out of character for him, but it was obvious that Dante and I were having a moment. The longer we traveled, the less I cared that Dante would remain in this form, and the sun started chasing away the darkness in my soul.

Dante

I strived to put as much distance between Mira and Highcrest as fast as possible. Every muscle in my body burned. The ache screamed at me to stop, to take a break and rest.

But this was my final mission. Ensure Mira got back to the manor. Home, where she belonged. A place she could be free. Now that her blessing had been broken, I wouldn't need to worry about others coming for her. She would finally have the safety and stability she'd never been given.

I just wouldn't be there to enjoy it with her.

Jasper and Calista would care for her. I knew they would. There were no better hands I could leave her with. They had become my family when I had none, and I had no doubts they would be that for her after I was gone.

Her small, warm body clutching to mine made it impossible to be angry with my life. All of it, the horrifying parts, the shameful parts, I would go through again in a heartbeat if it all led me to Mira.

I didn't even regret having to die for her. Sorrow attempted encroaching upon my heart, but I wouldn't allow it. An internal swell of pride kept me in a nearly blissful state of peace.

A man could die from many things, but dying to save the ones he loves was the best way to go. More than I deserved.

Jasper remained unusually quiet, but that placed more guilt on my shoulders. I'd asked him to do the hardest thing he would probably ever have to. If the roles were reversed, I would like to believe I would do the same for him, but the truth was that I would probably refuse. Seek for another way, a way around it.

Maybe that's why he was silent. Attempting to conjure up some plan that would save me.

But it had to be this way.

I'd make sure to comfort him in my last moments, reassure him. Sure, I'd be the one dying, but he would have to live with the burden afterward.

Jasper could have taken flight, returned home. My pace had slowed comparatively to before, but he remained by my side, each step a countdown to the inevitable. With me 'til the end.

Night had fallen, dropping the temperature significantly enough that Mira had shivered. But she never complained. As much as getting her to safety was my number one priority, I'd be lying if I said stopping to set up a fire and rest wasn't one last selfish indulgence.

Holding Mira close, not letting any part of her touch the ground, I secured her to me as we sat in front of the warming blaze. My paw worked in rhythmic strokes down her vibrant red hair, and when her heart rate had slowed, I knew she'd fallen asleep.

"Are you going to tell her?" Jasper asked while prodding at the logs under the crackling fire. He didn't bring his gaze to meet mine.

"No," I said, keeping my voice low so I wouldn't disturb her.

"Don't you think she deserves to know? A chance to say goodbye?" Anger gripped each of his words, though he kept his volume down.

"She won't accept it. Just like you, she'll be determined to find another way."

"There's got to be one."

"There isn't. If there was, I would take it. But Jasper, when I went feral at Marvoe's compound..." I didn't even want to say it out loud, to relive the monster I had become, but he had to understand.

"If Mira's heart hadn't slowed from her blood loss, enough to make me question if she was prey worth slaughtering, I would have. Without hesitation. I had no recognition of her or the entire reason we'd gone there in the first place. It was all buried under thirst and hunger. I can't control it when it comes. I wouldn't hesitate to kill her. You. Calista, Evenita, *Hu*." An emphasis on *Hu* put tension in his jaw.

"I live with those memories, Jas. Of everyone who fell to my rage. I still hear their screams in my nightmares, still see the blood marks splattering the walls. I can't become that again. I won't."

"I don't want to lose myself, Jasper, but it's what will happen. You heard Bonnie, same spell as before, only with the caveat that I remained clear minded long enough to bring her back." I looked down at the beauty in my arms.

"I hate this," Jasper gritted out, and I looked up to see his eyes brimming with tears.

"I know, my friend. I'm sorry it has to be you. But if it makes you feel better, there's no one else's hand I would rather die by than yours." I smirked.

"It doesn't." He wiped the falling tears down his cheeks, still avoiding me.

"I know."

The two of us sat in grim silence.



As soon as the morning sun broke the night, we continued. Mira clung to my back as I raced through the trees. The sound of her laughter brought me so much happiness and simultaneously shattered my heart.

My poor love had no idea what this day would bring. Making myself picture her grief felt like part of the punishment I should take for doing this to her. A mercy was that our last moments together wouldn't be doused in pain. They'd be happy memories.

A mix of my strength not being fully restored, and prolonging the inevitable, I slowed down our journey the closer we got. In spite of that, we were going too fast. Each step speeding up time toward a destination I struggled harder to accept the nearer it became.

The silhouette of the manor rested ahead through the thickets of trees, and my eyes darted to Jasper. His did the same to mine, but we kept quiet.

"Thank the gods we're here! I don't think there's anything I want more than a hot bath." Mira laughed, the sound floating through the air because it no longer carried a burden. I'd done that for her, and resolve set in anew.

I stopped, just shy of the garden. "Mira," the world's most beautiful word slipped through my lips.

She glanced back to see that I'd stopped, which made her stop and turn to face me. "What?"

"I love you." My lips wanted to tremble, to break apart and weep, knowing this would be the last time I saw her.

"I love you too." She smiled and ran to me, wrapping her arms around my waist.

I hugged back, watching a tear fall to the snow. "I want you to go, run your bath. Get something to eat, too," I ordered.

"Are you not coming in?" She pulled back, a confused scowl marking her beautiful features.

"Not yet. Jasper and I have something to do. Go take care of yourself, right away, alright?" I cupped her tiny face in my massive paws, running the pad of my furry thumb along her cheek. I missed the way my skin felt against hers, but to be able to touch her at all was the biggest blessing.

"Don't be too long." Lifting on the tips of her toes, she beckoned me to lower my face so she could press a kiss to my cheek. I wanted to freeze time, to remain here forever, but she tore away all too soon.

She picked up her skirts and trekked through the snow in the back, casting an alluring glare over her shoulder at me every few feet. The look warmed my heart. How I'd manage to captivate this stunning creature would be something I'd never understand.

She opened the back door to the kitchen, disappearing inside, and my smile fell. Jasper had given us some distance, leaning against a nearby tree.

"Grab the axe," I commanded softly, tipping my chin in the direction of the axe lodged in the stump where we split wood.

He wanted to refuse. His lips kept tensing. I braced for the backlash, but he simply pushed off the tree and flew to it. The stump cracked as he yanked out the blade.

I gave one last look at the manor before putting it at my back and bringing myself deeper into the woods so the evidence of what was to come wouldn't be seen from here.

Jasper flew overhead, the sound of his wings flapping high above. They seemed to beat in tune with the throbbing pulse of adrenaline coursing through my body.

Bringing my steps to a halt proved more difficult than I'd imagined, but this spot looked as good as any. Jasper came down, but landed a good ten feet away, refusing to face me head on, and stared at me over his shoulder. His eyes held a fear I'd never seen from him before.

Nothing I could say would make this easy. Instead, I simply lowered myself on one knee, then the other.

He sighed, shaking his head. The axe rested lazily in his grip, the tip of the blade grazing the snow on the ground. "King, I

don't want to do this."

"I know."

He craned his head back, exhaling heavily into the air. "You're my best friend."

"And you're mine," I admitted. It tore me apart to watch him struggle.

We looked at each other, locking our blurry gazes, each nodding in acceptance over the situation.

"You'll take care of her?" I asked, though I didn't need to.

"With my life, Dante." Hearing my name from him wasn't normal, but it drove home the seriousness of my request.

"You going to make me suffer in anticipation all day?" I joked, my tears making the fur on my face slick.

"How rude of me." He gave a breathy laugh and used his wrist to wipe under his nose. Then he began his walk toward me.

I laid myself down, knowing the most effective swing would require the leverage of gravity. My paws connected behind my back, and the ground became my pillow.

"You're a good man, King. The best I've ever known." He choked on the words.

"You should get to know more people," I jested.

He readied his stance, shifting the weight back and forth on his feet.

"I love you, Jasper. You're the brother I never had."

His breathing faltered. "I love you too, King."

Then I heard the axe rise into the air, and I shut my eyes.

I thought of Mira. A snippet from every moment we'd ever shared together played out. My heart lurched as I watched her evolve from the silent, cooperative captive to a woman who finally took back her life.

Those green eyes staring at me, filled with love, stole my focus as the axe readied to drop.

I love you, Mira.



Mira



I walked into the kitchen, relieved to be out of the cold. A stew boiled on the wood stove, filling the room with a savory aroma. After inhaling deeply, I let out a hum from the newfound contentment I had standing in this house.

My home.

I unclasped my cloak and set it on the hook. My stomach grumbled over the delicious meal. I hoped it'd be ready soon.

“Mira!?” Calista called from the sitting room.

How did she know it was me? I smiled, wondering if she'd been watching us travel back. Practically bouncing on my heels, I nearly skipped to her.

She stood in front of her normal chair, but her body language was tense. Her arms clenched each other, and she chewed on her bottom lip. I almost asked her what was wrong before I noticed an elderly woman sitting on the sofa in front of the window.

“Who’s this?” I asked while closing the distance. My gaze met the familiar striking purple and silver hair that cascaded over her shoulders. “It’s you,” I said, almost breathless, stunned at the coincidence.

A laugh galloped out of me as I spoke to Calista, “This is the witch who gifted me my stone in the market. You two know each other?!”

“She’s come to warn us,” Calista said, snuffing out every ounce of joy I’d carried into the conversation with her grave tone.

“About what?” Could I still be in danger? Did the prince not mean what he said? Could I have incited an invasion against Argora Vale?

“Dante thinks he has to die,” she said plainly, enough for me to question what she meant.

“Pardon?” I froze in place.

“Dante re-cursed himself to save you, yes?” the amethyst-eyed witch asked, but it was more of a statement.

“Yes.”

“Do you remember what happened to him the first time?” There was no urgency to her questions, but unease made my stomach flip over itself.

“Yes.” I recalled the events of his life since being cursed.

“What has been his biggest regret?” she coaxed, tender recognition in her eyes.

“Hurting people,” I simplified.

“Turning feral. Losing himself to the hunger,” she confirmed. “He didn’t want to press his luck with Bonnie, so the only consideration he gave to changing the curse this time around was not losing himself long enough to save you.”

“Long enough?” I snapped my gaze toward Calista. “Does that mean—”

“Yes, dear. He thinks he’s on the clock. What do you think he would do for you?” She changed the course of her questioning.

“Anything. He would do anything for me,” I said with my whole chest, knowing it was the truth.

“Specifically, what would he *do* for you, little gem?” She stared at me with knowing eyes full of wisdom, prodding me toward a pre-selected answer.

“He would...” I was about to say *everything*, when I landed on the one thing she wanted me to realize. “*Die* for me.”

It hit all at once. Dante’s curse meant he’d go feral again, and if he did, he knew that’d put me at risk.

He never intended on stepping back into this house.

I was running before I could think, my heart pounding so hard in my chest I thought it might break ribs.

Bursting through the kitchen door, I ran as fast as humanly possible. A set of beast tracks led away from the direction we’d come, and I knew to follow them. Tightness gripped my lungs, my chest threatening to cave in on itself.

But still, I pushed harder.

A high-pitched ringing sounded in my ears. I tried pacing my breaths to counteract the growing burn. My feet slammed into the snow with every step as my intention remained on him.

I couldn't lose him.

Nothing would stop me from getting to him. I wouldn't allow my body to give out.

Branches clawed at my skin as I raced between the trees, but they didn't slow me down. Internally, I sent up a prayer to the gods, to let me get to him before he did anything that couldn't be undone.

Unsure of how much ground I'd covered, the forest consumed me with its endless embrace of dead trees and solitude.

Finally, two figures appeared in the distance. I would recognize that massive, furry silhouette anywhere. Reinvigorated, I forced my legs to work faster, tearing my way through the snow. Dante shrunk, and I realized he lowered to his knees.

Movement just to the left drew my focus. Jasper started moving toward Dante. A glint of the sun blinded me for a moment, and my stomach wanted to empty itself upon understanding what I saw.

Metal. The blade of an axe.

Fear gripped my soul with the gentleness of violent claws. Dante lay on the ground, and Jasper positioned himself overtop.

No. No, no, no.

Everything I had went into propelling me forward. I could hear their voices, but didn't pick up the words. Jasper raised the axe, holding it over his head.

“DON'T!”

Jasper glanced over his shoulder, gray eyes wide in horror.

“Mira,” Dante breathed, opening his eyes. He rose as I closed the distance. I thought I'd want to hold him, to cry in his arms. That's not what happened.

Instead, I started pounding on his chest, hitting and slapping him in an unwinding rage. “HOW COULD YOU?” He didn't try to fight me off. It couldn't have felt nice, but surely my hands were suffering more than any part of him from my weak blows.

Getting some of it out of my system, the fatigue of it all took over. I turned to Jasper, making him my next target.

“WHAT THE FUCK WERE YOU THINKING?”

“I didn't want to do it, Mira!” Tears spilled from his eyes as he dropped the axe. I realized they must have been there this whole time since his cheeks were glistening.

I didn't know if that made it worse. He sobbed, obviously reeling from what he'd almost done.

“It's not his fault, Mira. I made him,” Dante said.

Turning to face him, my rage subsided into fear and hurt. “WHY WOULD YOU DO THIS TO ME?” I couldn't contain my own tears at this point.

“Mira. It has to be done.” He remained eerily calm, like it was a simple decision no more important than what to have for breakfast.

“No. It doesn't.” I sniffled, wiping my runny nose on my sleeve. “You are coming home with me. Now.” My bottom lip trembled as my stiff pointer finger faced the ground, reiterating my demand.

“Mira.” Dante made it sound like he wouldn't budge.

I refused. Re-playing what the witch had said to me, I understood why he was doing this. “You wanted to keep me safe. I will never be safe, not if I don't have you, I—”

He reached for me, pulling me into his embrace, silencing my tirade.

I continued, “So you will bring me home, right now, Dante! Do you hear me?” Immediately I broke, sobbing against him. I gripped so tightly, I was sure I pinched his skin. But he held me as I fell apart, securing me in his grasp.

“You said you would do anything for me,” I muffled into his fur through my choking sobs.

“I would, Mira. You know that.”

“Then don't do this to me.”

“I'm doing this *for* you. I'm going to put you in danger.”

“You don't know that! Don't die for me, Dante. Please. Live for me,” I begged.

“I love you so much.” He pressed a hard kiss to my head, and I could hear the emotions building in his throat.

“Take me home. Please,” I begged again.

“Alright,” he conceded.

My victory wasn't won yet, not if he still thought it at all an option to leave me like this. But for now, it wasn't a loss.

The three of us walked back to the manor in silence besides our sniffling recovery from crying. We reached the point where he had left me before, and I tightened my hold on him.

“I'm not letting you go,” I whispered. “I won't live without you.”

We crossed the threshold of the garden, and a blinding light burst out. Raising my arm, I shielded my eyes.

When the brightness faded, I dropped my arm. In front of me stood the man my heart belonged to.

“Dante?” A smile grew over my face, and I threw myself into his human arms.

I laughed and cried as I held him with my arms wrapped around his neck.

“I—” He didn't know what to say.

“You broke your curse again?!” Jasper asked, raking his fingers over his bald head, trying to process how it happened.

"I don't think I did?" Dante sputtered.

"You're back. Don't leave me," I whispered with my face buried in his shoulder.

He stroked my hair, his other arm secured to my lower back.

We walked through the kitchen door, and Calista called Jasper from the backyard where she stood with Evenita. They must have gone around the manor.

With this sliver of privacy, I couldn't hold back. I kissed him with everything in me. He returned it with the same vigor, slamming my back against the kitchen wall. My hands feverishly explored his hair, his back, his shoulders. All those human traits I feared I'd never behold again. Without words, we continued the awkward tumbling dance through the house until we made it upstairs to his bedroom.

I took the lead, pushing him onto the bed, and falling with him. I broke our kiss only to remove my clothing as I straddled his waist. Pulling my dress and slip over my head, he worked off his shirt and pants. I crashed my lips into his again, and he groaned as his hands desperately grabbed my hips.

He hooked his thumbs into my panties and worked to slide them down. Once we worked together to take them off, I straddled him again. His bare, hard length pressed against my stomach as I lay my body over his.

Our ragged breaths amplified the passion that burned for one another. I rolled my hips, sliding my exposed entrance over him.

"Gods, Mira," he breathed.

"Promise me you'll never leave me?"

"I fucking promise, my love."

I reached between us, running my palm along his shaft. He tossed his head back, praising my name. Grabbing his full cock in my hand, I directed it to my slick opening.

I lowered onto him and cried out from the breaching pressure. It was everything I needed. *He* was everything I needed. I sank further, taking in all of him, and moaned at the glorious feel of it.

"You're perfect," he breathed. He sat up, cupping the back of my head and pulled me close. Our mouths clashed together. A vicious, passionate fight of tongues and teeth as I worked to roll my hips over him. He groaned and raked his fingers across my scalp, fisting my hair and holding it tight.

This was the life I wanted, that I had fought for. To be here, with him, in this house, surrounded by our friends, free from the threat of others.

His mouth and tongue worked down my neck until he took in one of my nipples and sucked with magnificent execution. A mounting pressure built between my thighs, and I continued to ride him. His hips bucked, driving himself deep upon every thrust.

My fingers worked their way into his silky, bronze hair. Our foreheads pressed together as our hot breaths mingled between us.

"I love you, Mira. I'm so sorry," he rasped.

My fingers dug into his shoulders, holding him closer. "I love you so much." I silenced anything else he wanted to say by pressing my lips against his. His hands ran up the length of my back, and he hooked them over my shoulders, slamming me onto him as if he could hold us here forever.

I cried out, loving the way he held onto me, the way we were made for each other.

"Come for me, my love," he growled.

"I will, I will. Come with me," I panted as the overwhelming surge crested, bringing me to the brink. It took me under, and I called out his name as it did while tossing my head back as it consumed me.

He cried out, his hips jolting beneath me. I slumped over his shoulder, scratching his head with my nails affectionately as we came down from the tidal wave of pleasure. His solid arms wrapped around my torso, holding me close while we worked to regulate our breathing.

"You saved my life." He pressed a kiss to my ear.

"You saved mine."



Mira



Laughter and conversation carried through the air. The fireplace and candles cast warm light over the friendly faces that joined us for Jasper and Hu's anniversary dinner.

Evenita and I finally had a formal introduction. I thanked her for the stone and her advice as I watched Dante sitting at the dining room table chatting with Alaina.

"You were right about appearances," I said, gazing at the man I loved with nothing but affection.

"Oh, little gem, the fates had their hand in it long before I came around." The skin around her eyes creased as she smiled.

"You think?" I asked, liking that idea.

Her smile radiated. I would almost have thought she glowed.

Bonnie laughed at something Jasper said, and he sauntered out of the room smiling. She sat on the sofa next to Evenita. I still held mixed feelings toward the woman who'd cursed Dante—twice.

During the days since I returned, we'd gone to her home to ask her questions about her curse. She'd said, *"I told Dante that he would become the beast he truly was. This time, he wasn't much of a beast at all, was he?"*

Since then, we'd learned Dante could shift into his beast form whenever he desired. The light in Dante's eyes when he'd realized he could still provide for the people of Argora Vale had sparked such joy in my heart.

His beast form made it easier to travel across the kingdom, especially when we went to investigate the rumored settlement along the border. My blessing had worked on Dante before it disappeared, and he became more determined than ever to offset the effects of the spreading curse.

We found a camp full of refugees from Windguard, the kingdom to the east. They'd called their camp Rahana. All magic wielders, all bloodborn. They fled persecution in their land and had established a proper functioning home on the outskirts of Highcrest.

Herbalists grew gardens there in the fertile land untouched by the previous curse. Dante, Calista and Jasper negotiated trade. Food in exchange for border protection from the ogres. The first harvest had been distributed, feeding more families than Dante had ever managed before.

His eyes caught my gaze from across the room, and he made his way over to me, smiling. I couldn't hide the joy on my face.

"Not telling any embarrassing stories about me, are you Evenita?" He took a seat on the arm of my chair, resting his hand on the back of my neck. His touch warm, his grip possessive but loving.

"Should I tell her about the time I had to comb burs out of your fur for hours? From when you sat in a bush of them?" Evenita asked with a look of pure delight.

His soft chuckle warmed me more than the brown liquor Calista had brought back. "Maybe you should. It might be her job next time." He pressed a kiss to the top of my head. "Any updates?" he asked the witch, referencing a conversation they had days ago about a few of her friends' sudden disappearances.

"Unfortunately, no. Alaina has agreed to travel down south with me to ask around, see if anyone has heard from them."

"Let me know if you need anything," he said.

"Alright lads and ladies, you're about to witness something very special. A tie breaking game of Druids & Horseshoes that has been weeks in the making." Jasper swaggered back in the room, rubbing his hands together.

"Well, I think that's our cue, Bon," Evenita said, gathering her friend. Dante offered to escort them home, but Bonnie asked him if he thought she couldn't take care of herself. He backed off.

After a few hours, only Dante, Calista, Jasper, Hu and I remained. What should have been a tiebreaking game became several attempts, each gaining a one point lead ahead of the other. Hu excused himself to go to sleep upstairs, but Jasper fulfilled his good boyfriend duties and escorted him down the hall.

"This. Will. Never. End," Calista grumbled, massaging her temples. "I'm so tired," she whined. "This should do the trick."

She glanced down the hall to confirm Jasper was busy kissing Hu goodnight before wiggling her fingers.

On the board, several pieces moved their positions.

“I KNEW IT!” Jasper shouted, storming back into the parlor.

Calista and I jumped, gazes swinging to the ruffled gargoyle.

“I saw that! You tricky liar! You’ve been doing this all along!”

Calista fought to recover. “No, I haven’t! But this game would *never end*, Jas, and I’m exhausted.”

“You’ve probably *never* beaten me fairly. I’m probably an undefeated champ!” Jasper reeled.

“You’ve done it now,” Dante muttered, sliding his hand into mine and guiding me off the chair. We silently stepped away from the event that would go down in infamy, leaving Calista to untangle her mess—though I doubted she could.

Instead of heading upstairs, Dante pulled me left.

“What are we doing?” I asked.

“I have something I want to show you.”

We entered the study, which now hosted two chairs at the desk. The room had been dusted and tidied so we could read away from the endless rounds of Druids & Horseshoes in the parlor.

Dante rifled through papers on his desk, pulling one from the bottom. He stared at it, his fingers pulling the sheet taut.

“What’s that?”

Those beautiful brown eyes found mine. “I wrote you a poem.”

I sucked in a tiny gasp, struck by the intimate gesture.

He smiled, flashing his beautiful teeth. “And I want to read it to you by twinkler light. Come on.” He took me by the hand again and led me into the courtyard.

Twinklers danced like shooting stars around the fountain and bloomed roses. Moonlight showered the courtyard in a serene glow. He dropped my hand and fiddled with the paper. I could see his nerves building.

“Read it to me,” I softly encouraged.

He took a steady breath.

“Love is dug in dirt filled earth,
Crowded and away.
Thrives in dark and hidden doom,
Something yet in bloom,
Under cloudy skies and thundering cries,
Beneath its sunken tomb.

Buried deep, it calls for more, a whisper of the light.
Never a dawn to see its day, sleeping in the night.
But fervor stirs and it remains,
Begging for a hue.
Until it’s sprout sings to air,
A flower forth and true.”

His hands trembled as he lowered the paper. My heart pulsed to an erratic beat.

“You rose from dark, harsh conditions that should have crushed you. Instead, you kept yourself protected and eventually broke free. I’ve watched it. From the moment you chose to fight back and run from me in the woods, to when you chose to open your heart for a kingdom you were taught to fear.

“To when you didn’t need a beast to rescue you from a prince, because you set yourself free. You’ve bloomed, Mira, despite everything, you’ve bloomed. And I vow to you that you will never have to hide away again.” He took in a deep, shuddering breath, his beautiful brown eyes glazing with tears.

Warm streaks flowed down my cheeks. He tucked the paper into his pocket, closing the little distance between us in a heartbeat, and cupped my face, swiping the trails. “Why the tears, green eyes?” he said, blinking away his own.

“I’m just so happy we found each other.”

He tipped my chin until I connected with his loving gaze. “I would live this life a thousand times, knowing it brought me to you.”

Happiness spread across my lips, and he leaned down, letting his brush over mine with the lightest touch. “You are the world. Are you sure you choose me? You could have lived in a castle with a prince, you know,” he teased, dragging his lips over mine.

My grin became deliriously wide, my heart so full it threatened to burst. “Why would I choose a prince, when I could have a *King*?”

We laughed loud enough for the gods to hear on this dazzling, twinkler filled night. I seized his face with my hands, holding the life and love I never dreamed I could have, and kissed him.

Hard.

We moved to one of the stone benches, enjoying the fresh air. My arms lovingly encased his torso as his arm tucked me tightly into his side. A gentle breeze carried the hint of spring, signaling a new season on the horizon brimming with life. I stared at the wide expanse above and watched a star shoot across the sky. For the first time, I didn't silently pray.

I didn't need to know if the gods still watched, cared, or even existed. I'd found my peace, my home, my reason to believe in a better world. We would no longer leave our lives in the hands of the gods or fate.

As long as we had each other, not even curses could break us.



End of Book 1

Mira and Dante will return later in The Cursed Kingdom series.

Want to find out what Prince Nicholas is up to? Stay tuned for

Book 2, featuring a vigilante Cinderella.

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Thank You, Reader ♥

Thank you for reading Mira & Dante's love story! ♥

Please consider leaving a review on [Amazon](#), [Goodreads](#), and other social media platforms.

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Sephina Rossi doesn't expect to survive being sacrificed to the rift—let alone becoming an assistant to a morally grey monster.

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About Author



Lylah is a Canadian author who began her writing journey in 2020. Storytelling is a newfound passion, and she's OBSESSED. She hopes to build a dream life from her writing career, and maybe get to write by the ocean someday. More adventures and romance to come!

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